

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MARCH 2002 **MAGAZINE**

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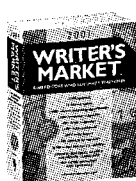
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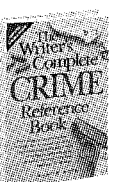
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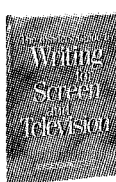
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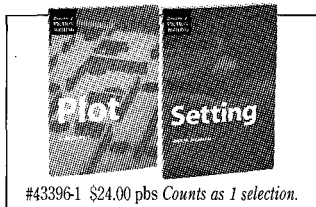
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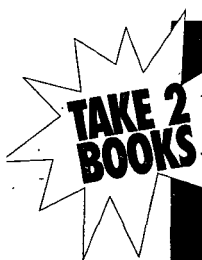
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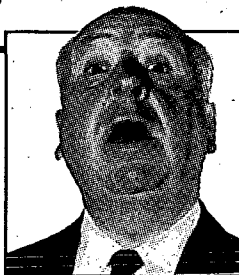
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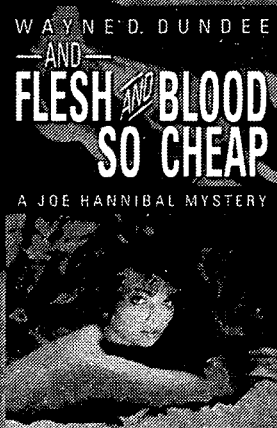
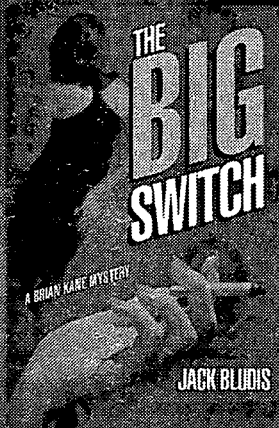
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

January 19th, about the time this issue reaches you, is the date of Edgar Allan Poe's birth in 1809, which we hereby celebrate. And almost upon us is Valentine's Day. What more appropriate, then, than to bring you Poe's puzzle poem "A Valentine"?

See page 139 for the answer.

*For her this rhyme is penned,
whose luminous eyes,*

*Brightly expressive as the twins
of Leda,*

*Shall find her own sweet name,
that nestling lies*

*Upon the page, enwrapped from
every reader.*

*Search narrowly the lines!—they
hold a treasure*

*Divine—a talisman—an amulet
That must be worn at heart.*

Search well the measure—

*The words—the syllables! Do
not forget*

*The triviallest point, or you may
lose your labor*

*And yet there is in this no-Gor-
dian knot*

*Which one might not undo with-
out a sabre,*

*If one could merely comprehend
the plot.*

*Enwritten upon the leaf where
now are peering*

*Eyes scintillating soul, there lie
perdus*

*Three eloquent words oft uttered
in the hearing*

*Of poets, by poets—as the name
is a poet's, too.*

*Its letters, although naturally ly-
ing*

*Like the knight Pinto—Mendez
Ferdinando—*

*Still form a synonym for Truth—
Cease trying!*

*You will not read the riddle,
though you do the best you can
do.*

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BLOOD BROTHERS

Jeremiah Healy

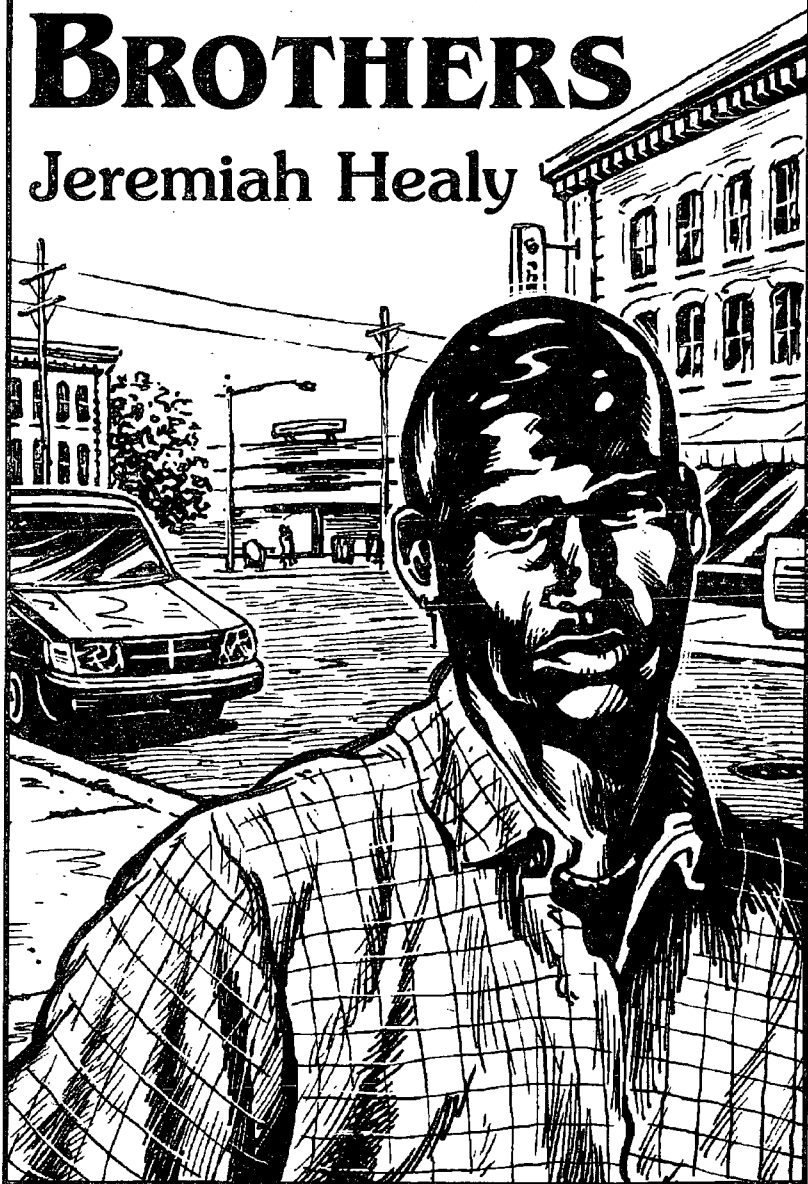


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/02

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The young man said, "Mr. Cuddy, thanks for seeing me so quickly," as he released my hand and took a client chair in front of my desk. Black and maybe mid-twenties, Kevin Griggs wore his hair cropped short. He moved like someone comfortable with his surroundings, though I was as sure as a sole proprietor could be that he'd never visited JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS in Boston before.

I sat back down. "Mr. Griggs, how can I help you?"

He seemed pained now, drawing in one slow motion a folded piece of computer printout from an inside pocket of his sports jacket. "A man was killed four months ago." Griggs made a little ceremony of opening the paper, as though he were an actor in a theater and commanding the audience's attention. "The man's name was Lonzel Patterson." Griggs now half-rose from his chair, extending the paper toward me. "This article doesn't say so, but Lonzel was my cousin."

I took it. Its headline, HUSBAND CLEARED AS POLICE FIND REAL KILLER, was from a Metro-West edition and reminded me of the case. The gist of it: Police in the suburban town of Calem suspected a local insurance agent named Harvey Mason of shooting his wife, Maggie. At least until three days later, when our homicide unit got called out for a body in Boston's neighborhood of Roxbury and found Lonzel Patterson. He was dead from gunshot wounds himself, the murder weapon from Calem in his hand. Mrs.

Mason's earring turned up in one pants pocket and a block-printed description of Mr. Mason's Jaguar in another.

I brought my eyes up from the portrait photo of a shaved-head Patterson to the face of Kevin Griggs. "You and your cousin looked a lot alike."

A sad smile. "Our grandmother thought so, too. We could even fool her sometimes, at least until Lonzel started talking."

"You didn't sound alike?"

"No, I was the one who went to college, drama major."

Making his mannerisms stagecraft.

Now Griggs shook his head. "Lonzel was street. Oh, he'd try to mimic me, but he couldn't quite pull it off. On the other hand, Don't take no *brain* surgeon to rap like a homiey from the 'hood.'"

Not just the words and the tone but also the change in body language. I had the impression that I'd enjoy seeing Kevin Griggs in a play sometime, but that wasn't why he was here.

I said, "You have reason to believe something isn't quite the way this article reads?"

"A couple of reasons." Griggs shifted forward in his chair like a lawyer arguing a case. "First, the reporter printed that note the police found in Lonzel's pocket. Unless they were cleaning it up 'to spare the family,' there's no way Lonzel could have gotten all the spelling right."

I found the paragraph on the handwritten description. "Jaguar XK8, green w/tan int. and tonneau

top." I looked back at Griggs. "I'm not sure most people could spell tonneau, though somebody else could have written the note as a 'steal to order' for a certain car."

Griggs changed his expression and began answering the question I hadn't quite asked. "Lonzel was a hot-wire artist. He'd boost anything with wheels and a motor. Only this one was different."

"How so?"

"As a day job I do freelance computer research—" Griggs tapped the article "—but four months ago, I was accepted into a Shakespearean troupe leaving to tour Europe. My 'big break,' playing a black Iago to a white Othello, but with promises for a Richard III and even a Hamlet. Anyway, I called Lonzel, let him know I was going to be gone, because the two of us were the last of our family still alive. He tells me about this gig to steal a Jaguar for five hundred dollars. When I tell him he should quit that stuff, Lonzel says, 'Yo, no sweat, bro. I took the dude's money up front, but I ain't about to boost the wheels.' And I reply, 'What do you mean?' And Lonzel goes, 'Dude's this insurance maggot. Let him do the paperwork gets him the money and keep his car to boot.'"

Griggs allowed it to sink in.

I said, "You think this Mason was the 'insurance maggot.'"

"Seems like an incredible coincidence if he weren't."

"And Mason hired your cousin to steal his car..."

"...as, I don't know, some kind of cover for killing his wife, to make it look like the 'black car thief' did it.

Except that when Lonzel never showed to boost the Jag, Mason didn't have a patsy for the shooting, and the man probably felt he had to kill Lonzel as a potential threat."

My potential client's theory held water, but just barely. "You've been to the police about this?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Two things. First, I just got back three days ago from Europe to find out Lonzel's dead. Second, I've never even played a cop, but what do you think the chances are the police'll reopen this nice closed case with a ribbon tied on it just because a relative of their ghetto-raised career criminal asks them to?"

Griggs's turn to not quite say it, but based on an experience I'd had in Calem, the fact that both cousins were black wouldn't help his cause. "So you'd like me to do what?"

"Look into this, but quietly, like maybe a private eye can. Don't so much go after Mason as sniff around the edges, see if there's anything more so my telephone conversation with Lonzel looks like a real clue or piece of evidence instead of just some daydream I made up out of thin air."

I decided to test Griggs a little. "Most people don't know it, but the telephone company actually logs local calls."

He seemed surprised, then said, "But that'd just show I made the call to Lonzel, and maybe how long we talked, not what we talked about, right?"

"Right."

"Even so, Mr. Cuddy, if you can get that log record, it'd be a help to

my version of what really happened, wouldn't it?"

"Probably."

"So what do you say?"

I pictured the man on the Boston Homicide Unit who'd asked me to do him a favor on that case out in Calem. "I'll give it a day's worth of my time and your money."

Kevin Griggs nodded as he deftly plucked a checkbook from the other inside pocket of his sports jacket.

A couple of years ago the Boston force had moved from its old headquarters—and half a dozen auxiliary buildings scattered around the city—to its new facility on Ruggles Street. Most of the specialty units were consolidated into one double-winged structure that could masquerade as the eagle's nest of a successful corporation.

At least until you saw the black and white silhouettes on the POW-MIA pennant that somebody had thought to bring from the old homicide digs over a converted police garage in South Boston. The pennant usually reminded me of my time in Vietnam, but right then I thought the fluttering cloth added just the right touch of "the building may be new, but it's still us in here."

"Cuddy. Welcome to Microsoft, the Police Force." Lieutenant Robert Murphy had been the first African-American on Homicide, elevated when a half-drunk city councilor mistook surname for race and passed on a veto. Murphy—six feet and barrel-chested—now com-

manded the unit, though the only tour he gave me of his new offices was a sweep of the hand at computer monitors, older detectives hunting and pecking while younger ones touch-typed on the keyboards.

Over his shoulder he said to nobody in particular, "I'll be in Interrogation."

I entered the small room behind him. The walls weren't yet smudged or dented, the carpet not yet worn or stained, the table not yet etched or scarred. As we sat down, I expressed admiration for how my tax dollars had been spent.

Murphy gave me a half-lidded Buddha smile. "You clear enough money to *owe* any taxes?"

"Speaking of clearing, there's a case I've been asked to look into."

"One of ours, I'm guessing."

"Kind of half and half." I went through it with him.

Murphy pursed his lips. "When Patterson looked to be connected to the Calem killing, I took over on this end. Sounds to me like the cousin's telephone call and his view of Patterson's penmanship are all you've got."

"Not penmanship so much as educational level."

"Unless somebody other than Patterson wrote the note. Way it plays to my ear, that somebody wanted a particular vehicle boosted for a particular customer. Patterson goes and finds one, then panics when the Mason woman catches him in the act. He shoots her, comes back empty on the car and dirty on a killing, and gets shot himself by the disappointed somebody who

didn't like to see a loose thread like Patterson dangling for us—or Calem—to pull."

"Only your side of the case is still open, right?"

Murphy raised his palms toward the ceiling. "In the sense that we don't have a suspect for Patterson's untimely departure, yeah. Calem's side, though?"

"Open and shut," I said.

"No, but next thing to."

"Like with William Daniels."

Murphy frowned. A couple of years back, he'd asked me to help Daniels, a black college student accused in Calem of killing his white girlfriend. I'd broken the case but while wearing a wire whose product was unfortunately declared inadmissible by the court involved.

Murphy got up. "Figure I owe you one, all right. Sit still here, if that's possible."

Two minutes after leaving the room he returned, paging through a file like a choirmaster choosing his next hymn. "We gave the original of that Jaguar note to Calem—or, more accurately, in a chain-of-evidence sense, to the state trooper assigned to the case by the county prosecutor's office. But we kept a copy that ought to be good enough for you."

I read the note. Block-printed in all caps and the newspaper reporter hadn't gussied it up any. "Okay, lieutenant. I grant you this note supports both my client's position and your steal-to-order theory. But how about that phone call?"

"I'll get the company to pull its logs, but that's just going to show a call was made, not that they talked

about any insurance man and his car."

Maybe Robert Murphy and Kevin Griggs had attended the same college. "What about the murder weapon?"

"We didn't recover the one that killed Patterson. But he had the revolver that did Mrs. Mason in his hand. And both his skin and his grungy cargo pants tested positive for gunpowder residue."

"Prints?"

"On the frame."

"But not on the shells."

"No."

"How about serial number?"

"Wiped."

"As in filed away?"

"As in acid wash so the lab couldn't bring it up at all."

I nodded. "Lieutenant, you know many car thieves who'd go to that much trouble?"

"These days? Hell, I know sixth-graders who'd go to that much trouble. They learn it off the TV. Besides, we got the residue evidence, so Patterson'd fired the piece, either that night or at the Masons' house."

"Or somebody put the revolver in his dead hand and fired it for him."

A shrug.

I said, "How about Patterson's time of death in relation to the Mason woman?"

"Hard to tell. We didn't get the call on him till three days after the Calem killing, when he started providing aromatherapy to his neighbors in the apartment house."

"None of whom heard any shots in the interim."

"Oh, they heard them all right. They just neglected to notify anybody or even take a peek out their triple-locked apartments. And by the time we did our own door-to-door, your guess as to when the shots were fired would probably sound better than half of theirs."

Felt like a dead end. "Who did you work with in Calem?"

"Statie's name was Prestifillipo," said Lieutenant Robert Murphy, the drowsy Buddha smile reappearing. "But the Calem PD guy on it was your old friend."

I hadn't seen Detective Paul O'Boy in a while, but he looked to be winning the battle of the waistline and losing the battle of the hairline. Truth to tell, the man had been at Dunkirk on the latter for as long as I'd known him.

"So, Cuddy, you eat yet?"

We were standing in the reception area of his stationhouse. "No."

"Come on, there's a good Thai place opened up just across the street."

I looked through a tall window toward the park with a Revolutionary War cannon and matching statues around a white gazebo. "It's well camouflaged."

"Not across from here. Across from Mason's insurance agency."

"Duck tamarind for me," said O'Boy as the waitress set two tall glasses of iced tea on our table.

"I'll have the chicken with baby corn and mushrooms."

She smiled, took our menus, and left us over the drinks.

O'Boy gestured out the window

at the main street Calem had so painstakingly renovated to look just as it had in 1790. "Who would've thunk it? Bringing the people back to the downtown and away from the malls."

I saw lots of folks milling around, all right. But they seemed to me older—even elderly—visitors with color-coded badges on their chests and not many shopping bags in their hands.

"Looks great if Calem can live off the tour buses."

"Yeah," said O'Boy. "There's that." He twisted in his chair. "Service here is real fast, so you might want to keep your eye on that red door over there."

I could see the gold lettering above it. "Calem Insurance Agency."

O'Boy said, "Harvey Mason, the grieving widower, inherited it eight years ago from his wife's father. Great location with a cute redhead playing secretary-receptionist out front and Mason's inner sanctum behind. He ran the business pretty well, too, till the Internet arrived."

"With online quotes that under-sold him."

"You got it." O'Boy twisted back, sipped some of his tea. "Why we liked him for the killing of his 'prudently' insured beloved."

"How prudently?"

"Flat million."

"She have any income stream to justify such a high face-amount?"

"Nope," said O'Boy. "Our Maggie was a 'lady of the club.' Or clubs. But Mason told us he used the policy on her as kind of a sales pitch. You should insure *your* spouse, too, because I follow my own advice."

"Convenient."

"It gets better. Seems they weren't the happiest couple in town. Though you could make a case for Mason and his secretary—Tina Lipinski—on that score, pun intended."

"Money worries, big policy, hanky-panky. Sounds like a case for the death penalty, if we had one."

"I told you. This statie Prestifilipo and me both liked Harvey for it till Boston gave us Lonzel."

"I spoke with Lieutenant Murphy on that."

"Then you know as much as I do." O'Boy paused while our waitress—true to his prediction—arrived carrying a tray of food. When she left us again, he said, "Lonzel was found with the gun that killed my decedent in his hand plus one of the earrings she was wearing that night and a note describing the husband's car."

O'Boy began eating.

After a moment I said, "About the earring?"

Around a mouthful of duck he said, "Tore it out of her earlobe. We found the other one in the garage, under the lawnmower. Way it figures, Maggie hears Lonzel working on the car in the driveway. She goes out through the garage door—"

"Wait a minute. Where's the husband?"

O'Boy swallowed. "Where?"

"His car's there. Where's he?"

"In bed and drunk as a skunk, he told us. Slept through the whole thing."

"You find that believable?"

"Cuddy, for the third time, we liked him for it, okay? But their

bedroom's at the back of the house and diagonally away from the garage, and when we got there, Mason's breath smelled like the vent outside a distillery. Now, could a good lawyer make that into reasonable doubt? Maybe. Only then Lonzel comes along on a platter, so we don't have to worry about it."

"Going back," I said, "That night Mrs. Mason walks out the garage door..."

"...and Lonzel whacks her, then tears off the earring."

I shook my head: "A car thief, panicked enough to shoot in a suburban neighborhood, stops long enough to swipe a piece of jewelry?"

"Hey, Cuddy, I long ago gave up trying to understand criminals. They're like cats: you think you've finally got them down, and then they do something that completely blows your theory out of the water." O'Boy motioned toward my plate. "Eat before your chicken gets cold."

"One more question first?"

"What?" said Detective Paul O'Boy, fork almost at his lips.

"You know anything about this redhaired secretary's lunch breaks?"

Tina Lipinski didn't go out to lunch that day, but a few hours later she emerged from behind the red door and went down to the local Starbucks for a latte. I know because I followed her. The place was crowded, all the tables taken. When she ordered her coffee to stay, I got a ready-made bottle of spring water. After slipping two teens twenty bucks to vacate their seats,

I sat down as Lipinski, coffee in hand, began scanning the room.

I said, "Please, share my table."

She hesitated, but in her late twenties Lipinski seemed confident enough not to worry about a geezer like me, and with a terse "thanks" took the chair opposite mine.

I let her get settled before saying, "You work around here?"

Her face wrinkled as though she were deciding how much interchange my courtesy actually demanded. "Up the street."

Be oblique. "I'm house-hunting in the area. I wonder, do you have a good real estate broker to recommend?"

"Sure. We work with, like, a couple of them."

She reeled some names off, identifying specific individuals to ask for and saying I should use her name: "Tina, from Calem Insurance."

I wrote down the last suggestion. "Well, I suppose I'll be needing homeowners' and car coverage, too. Can you recommend yourself?"

That got a smile that I thought was part business and part something else. "Harvey—my boss, Harvey Mason?—is real good. But I'm not sure, like, how much longer we'll be here."

I didn't want to emphasize the "we" part. "Here, meaning in Calem?"

"Yes." A measured look now. "He had a death in the family."

"Gee, I'm sorry. Is he back to work yet?"

"Oh yeah. This was months ago. But he kind of wants to leave Calem. He'll be selling the agency,

though, so I'm sure there'd be, like, a smooth transition."

"Hey, better than no recommendation at all. What should I use for address and telephone?"

Tina Lipinski told me, then said she had to get back, as there were, "like, these mountains of files to process" before she could leave. I had a feeling that "leave" wasn't referring to the end of her workday.

Back in my office, overlooking the Boston Common and the Park Street subway station, I went over what I thought I'd learned. True to Kevin Griggs's request, I'd tried to enter the waters surrounding the deaths of Maggie Mason and Lonzel Patterson without roiling them, but the only new fact I had was Tina Lipinski's confidence that she and Harvey Mason were going to be taking off soon. Even adding that to the incongruous behavior of a car thief carrying a gun professionally wiped by acid, then stopping to rip a single earring off a woman he'd supposedly just killed, the soup was still pretty thin. Especially with Paul O'Boy's take on criminals' being unpredictable, including not so bright ones like Lonzel Patterson, at least as my actor/client played him for . . .

I stopped. Turned it around a few times in my mind. The ploy hadn't worked for me once, but maybe it could, this go-round.

Picking up my phone, I dialed the Calem Police number. When the call went through, I said, "O'Boy, you improve any on the legalities of wearing a wire during an investigation?"

“I give you credit for trying this,” I said.

Kevin Griggs shrugged. “Hey, Mr. Cuddy—”

“John.”

“John, you’re the one who had the idea.”

I was driving my client to the Callem Police, where he’d be fitted by a state trooper with a remote transmitter. Griggs had shaved his head, and he was dressed in a flannel shirt and the kind of baggy, leg-pocketed cargo pants his cousin had been wearing when he was killed. The pants had given Griggs trouble climbing into the passenger side of my old Honda Prelude, and he’d laughed—a little nervously, I thought—that he’d best get more accustomed to the costume before the curtain went up on his performance.

Once we were in the station and the statie began outfitting Griggs with a light Kevlar vest and taping gadgetry onto it under the shirt, Detective Paul O’Boy maintained a running commentary. “The secretary, Lipinski, will get a call that takes her out of the agency. We’re going to be half a block away in our surveillance van.” He motioned to a stern young woman in courtroom clothes. “This is Sue Feder, the assistant district attorney who got us permission for the wire. She’ll be listening, too, and once Mason says what she needs to hear, we’ll be hitting the front door.”

Griggs nodded, still seeming a bit nervous. “Basically, I get him to admit hiring ‘me’ for stealing the car as a cover for his killing his wife.”

Feder spoke for the first time. “You just start him talking and then keep him talking till you hear the big red door of that agency crash behind you.”

“Got it.”

O’Boy looked at me, then back to Griggs. “Anything else?”

Kevin Griggs slumped, lolling his head a bit. “Be okay with you bad-ges if I jump a ride over there with my homey here?”

O’Boy and Feder both smiled in a way that implied they were genuinely impressed by the transformation and not just bucking up my client’s spirits.

Maybe half a mile from the insurance agency office, I turned to Griggs. “I’m guessing Mason’ll want to stay behind whatever desk he has in that inner office, like a barrier between you.”

“I hear that, bro.”

I didn’t comment, assuming that Griggs had to stay in character till the sting was over. He’d fumbled again with the cargo pants getting back into my Prelude, so I figured only positive reinforcement made sense now.

“Kevin, that desk can work for you, too.”

“Say what?”

“If he makes you as a fake—”

“Never happen.”

“—or even buys the whole routine but turns nasty, just yell, ‘Now, now,’ and drop flat on your side of the desk.”

Kevin—or Lonzel—did a knock-knock on his chest. “My man, this here’s a bulletproof vest.”

“You’re wearing a deflector that

can be penetrated if our friend—who seems to like his guns—has one powerful enough.”

“Yo, no sweat, homes, you know what I’m sayin’? No sweat.”

As I stopped a block away from the agency to let Kevin Griggs out, I hoped so. I truly did.

The inside of the surveillance van smelled of stale cigarettes and coffee. The four of us were sitting here and there, the state trooper wearing earphones and adjusting some kind of sound board.

A.D.A. Feder said, “No one should be allowed to smoke in this thing.”

O’Boy spoke into his own microphone, checking on the readiness of his team members. He appeared to like their answers.

Then the trooper nodded once abruptly and flipped a switch that activated a speaker in the van.

I could hear Kevin Griggs as Lonzel announce, “Remember me?”

A male voice replied, “Jesus. I don’t . . . Lonzel?”

It had worked. I began listening to our live radio play.

GRIGGS: Mind if I take a seat?

MASON: What . . . what’re you . . .

GRIGGS (a sigh): Doing alive? Well, I got to tell you, man, you done the wronnnng *ghetto* dweller.

MASON: The wrong . . .

GRIGGS: Was my cousin Kevin you popped. Him and me, we was like twins, our grandma always say.

MASON: I don’t . . . I don’t know what you’re talking about.

GRIGGS: You don’t? Then, like they say in the trials, let me refresh your memory, homes. You the man want me to boost his fancy

Jag wheels, on account of you this *insurance* maggot. Only thing is, you didn’t want just the piddly little *insurance* money on your *car*. Oh no. You want the whole *enchilada*. (A pause.) You want your wife dead, and the money be coming to you on *her* policy, just like the papers say.

MASON: But the prints . . . the fingerprints from your police records wouldn’t have matched the body.

O’Boy jerked his head up to Feder. “Is that enough?”

She shook her head. “One more nail.”

I was wondering if my client had an answer to Mason’s question.

GRIGGS: The police ain’t no geniuses, homes. One of my neighbors don’t know my cousin identify the body as me, and there’s the gun kill your wife in his hand. So I’m saying the police probably never even *look* at my prints they got on file. Just one more jailhouse jigaboo dead, all they care about, and case closed. (A pause.) Until now, that is.

MASON: What do you want?

GRIGGS: I want to hear your mouth say you kill my blood, man. Then we go on from there.

O’Boy muttered, “He’s laying it on too thick.” I thought the same.

MASON: Are you crazy?

GRIGGS: Look, man, I don’t care about you offing your wife. That one you can walk on. I just want to hear you killed my cousin, then we can negotiate my *settlement*.

MASON: Your . . . settlement?

GRIGGS (a laugh): Right on, bro. As poor Kevin’s next of kin. You hear what I’m saying, *insurance* maggot?

MASON: You . . . neither you or your cousin was supposed to be killed. I just needed somebody to—

Assistant D.A. Feder said, "That's enough."

GRIGGS: —to cover your ass. But then things went into the toilet, and you killed my blood.

O'Boy barked into his mike, "Team! Go, go, go!"

MASON: I don't have to— (A scraping sound, like metal on—)

GRIGGS: What you doing, man?

(A crack, as though somebody clapped hands next to your ear.)

O'Boy said, "Shot fired! Shot fired!"

GRIGGS: Oh no. No, God. Cuddy, I'm—

Feder closed her eyes. "Goddammit!"

I was through the door and running up the street before I heard the second shot.

The insurance agency smelled of cordite and released bowels. On the whole I preferred the surveillance van.

As a crime scene, Mason's inner office looked more like a battlefield. Behind a massive mahogany desk, two of O'Boy's officers—bulky in thick Kevlar and carrying assault rifles—hovered over the body of a husky white man on the polished hardwood floor. Most of Mason's shirtfront was drenched in blood, a blackened entry wound about where his breastplate stopped shielding his heart. A third Calum officer, rifle slung, was helping an EMT with Kevin Griggs. My client smiled weakly at me from the metal chair in front of the desk, then

grimaced as a bandage was taped over his left bicep, the flannel shirt cut away to allow access to the wound. Sue Feder was watching Paul O'Boy hold a small, nickel-plated revolver in a plastic Baggie, the detective waggling it like a hypnotist in front of her eyes.

He said, "What do you want to bet the numbers have been washed off?"

Feder glanced down at Mason. "No takers here."

I asked them if I could get a better view of the body.

O'Boy deferred to the prosecutor, who shrugged and said, "The Crime Scene Unit's going to be screaming at us anyway."

I moved slowly, careful not to touch anything. Crouching by the body, though, I was looking elsewhere. Then, like A.D.A. Feder in our van, I closed my eyes.

The emergency room doctor said, "That should do it. Take one of these every four hours if you need some help with the pain."

Kevin Griggs nodded to her from his sitting position on the gurney, surrounded on three sides by those "privacy" curtains. The disinfectant and recycled air didn't help the knot in my stomach any.

"Otherwise," said the doctor as a nurse called her name, "you're a lucky man."

"Thanks," he replied as she turned and moved away.

When we were alone, Griggs looked up at me. "Where did the detective and prosecutor go?"

"Back to the station," I said as evenly as possible, "to write up their

reports about our wire sting. You know: Mason opening that desk drawer and firing a shot at you, the struggle for the gun, the bullet entering his chest. Everything you told us."

"Well," said Griggs a little uncertainly, reaching for what was left of his flannel shirt. "I guess I need another ride from you, then."

"Afraid I can't oblige, Kevin."

The face snapped up this time. "What?"

"You played the police—and me—perfectly, but this is as far as I go."

"I don't know what you're talking about, John."

I felt my blood rising. "That was Harvey Mason's favorite line, wasn't it? He saw you in front of his desk in that inner office, and he believed you were Lonze Patterson. You sat down and talked with the guy, led him beautifully. You got us everything the prosecutor needed, and then you executed your cousin's killer."

"Didn't that transmitter I was wearing work?"

"It worked just fine."

"Then you heard what happened, John."

"I did. And it would have flown perfectly. If only."

"If only?"

"If only Mason had had a metal desk instead of a wooden one."

"What are you saying now?"

"Just before the first shot, the four of us in the van heard this scraping sound."

"Sure, that was Mason, pulling out the drawer where he kept his gun."

"No, Kevin. What we heard was

the sound of your pushing back abruptly in your metal chair on that hardwood floor so you could lunge across the desk and shoot Mason square against his chest, to kill him with one bullet and leave powder burns to corroborate your version of a struggle. The second shot was you putting the gun in his hand—just like he'd done with your cousin—and then firing the bullet that grazed your arm."

"Man, I didn't *have* a gun. You saw me be half undressed by that cop putting the transmitter on me."

"Those cargo pants, with the big side pockets? I figured it was just you dressing for the role, so when you had trouble getting into my car, I chalked it up to unfamiliarity with the baggy legs. But that wasn't the problem. You were stashing the gun on the passenger side, then putting it back into the cargo pocket in your pants for the walk to the insurance agency. That's why you wanted to ride with me from the police station: you needed to retrieve the gun to avenge your cousin."

"You're blowing smoke, John, and I can't see why."

"With all the hubbub in Mason's office, I don't know if the ballistics people will be able to tell which shot was first or whether either is wrongly angled. I don't know if anybody listening to the tape of your performance will hear what I did and put it together." Now I felt my voice growing cold. "But I do know you set me up to be part of your revenge, and I want to know why."

"Why?"

"Why didn't you just go to the police?"

A transformation, and suddenly I wasn't with Kevin Griggs any more.

"You want to know *why*, homey? I tell you *why*. That white trash set up my cousin to be busted for murder, and when the dude's wife-killing don't come off the way he plan, he hunt my blood down like a dog and shot him. Then he plant that earring and gun on him so Lonzel'd look like just another ghetto car thief gone and shot some poor suburban housewife. I go to the police with that, who gonna believe me?" A little twinkle in the eye now. "And besides, we don't got no death penalty in this state anyways."

"All right, then why not just kill Mason outright? Why *come* to me?"

"You aren't as smart as I feared, John." Now it was Griggs again. "If Harvey Mason turned up dead shortly after I got back to the area, who do you think the police might think of first as his killer? The vengeful relative, right? So I did a little freelance computer research for myself. Not that article I showed you on Mason and Lonzel. I went back a ways, and I found an article about you and that balding bumbler O'Boy and how you two screwed up a wire sting in his town. Which got me to thinking how I could avenge my cousin without the police *suspecting* it was me because they'd *know* it was me, and they wouldn't want to taint another undercover effort by publicly accusing the man wearing the wire of

anything but self-defense. I needed you as the only private eye who might pick up on my ability to imitate Lonzel and who also might have the brainstorm to suggest a sting to the police." A smile, though if you'd been there you might not have called it that. "You were the perfect actor for the role."

Grinning, I said, "O'Boy and Feder, you can come out now."

Griggs whipped his head wildly left, right, and behind him. "What the ..."

"No," I said when neither appeared, "they really are back at the station, getting their reports consistent with what you made them think happened."

Griggs glared up at me. "Then why'd you just try to make me believe they weren't?"

"After every great performance, doesn't an actor have to get used to looking over his shoulder for fans? Or stalkers, even?"

I pointed my index finger at him and cocked my thumb like the hammer on a revolver. Then I let the thumb fall.

Turning, I heard Kevin Griggs say, "John, what are you talking about?"

Then, entering the emergency room waiting area, I heard Lonzel Patterson scream, "Yo, what you *sayin'*, man?"

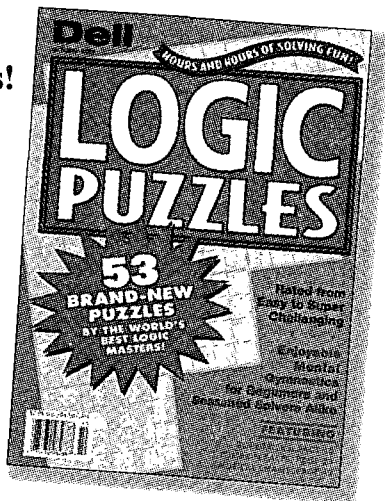
In fact, everyone around me heard him, but I just shook my head and went outside for some fresh air.

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FICTION

The Painted Lady


DeLoris Stanton Forbes



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/02

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Most of the people I deal with in my profession are women, and many of the women I deal with say silly things like, "Oh, I just fell in *love* with that house." They say things like that because my job is to usher women through houses like a tour guide. I'm a realtor; here's my card.

See, it says LOWELL AMES, REAL ESTATE, and it's got a line drawing of a house in one corner, a sketch like a kid would make. There's a rectangle with a peaked roof and a chimney with smoke coming out. My friend Arty said that the drawing looked stupid, to which I said, "What business are you in, Arty?" And he said, "You know I took early retirement," at which point I said, "When you get a job, I'll take your advice."

So when a woman says she's fallen in love with a house, I think to myself, yeah, you're in love with a house, lady, but that won't sell your fat-faced husband, Mrs. So-and-so. He's got his eye on the bottom line, and when he finds out the seller won't budge on his two hundred eighty-five thousand seven hundred fifty dollar asking price, Mr. Fifty-inch-waist So-and-so will tell you, "So get over it," and you'll end up with a hundred fifty thousand dollar number that looks like everybody else's, and that's the way it goes in the real estate business. I should know.

Besides, people don't fall in love with houses. They get infatuated. And more often than not, Mrs. So-and-so ends up buying something from some other realtor, something cheaper but maybe even more eye-catching and thus halfway satisfying that Mr. and Mrs. will fight about for the rest of their married days, and that's the way it goes. Or they go ape over something far too expensive (again offered by some other realtor) for some other reason and start a downward spiral of second mortgages and bank foreclosures guaranteed to haunt them for years. Buyers kid themselves.

But people fall in love with the *idea* of a house, not the house itself. I know that for sure. I should, I've been in the real estate business long enough. Eighteen years, going on nineteen, I've seen it all. The days when the only way to go was to sweet-talk the hell out of the buyer, and then those other times when it was strictly a seller's market. Today it's mezzo-mezzo, a little of each. For one thing, there's plenty of credit floating around. More and more of what used to be called the middlers have become the big spenders. But I don't believe the fable that there's one perfect house—just one—to spend a lifetime in. Even though I preach it. When it suits me.

But then Hector Muñoz built his painted lady. And Ramona Kurtz fell in love.

Ramona Kurtz, self-proclaimed newcomer to the Fairland area, was the one who called the Muñoz house a painted lady. "Beg pardon?" I said. I thought I'd heard her wrong.

"It's *wonderful*. All my life I've been looking for a painted lady of my own. Just like this, this is *it*. What fabulous *colors!*" she dimpled. She had

full cheeks and high cheekbones; she was what my friend Arty, who was into lady-watching, would call a dish and a half.

"A painted lady," I repeated. "Yes. Well, Hector's got a fine reputation as a builder. Great attention to detail. He uses top-of-the-line materials, incorporates all the very latest conveniences, and still manages to keep his houses traditional in appearance. But it does tend to make his properties kind of pricey."


She blinked long eyelashes at me. "Money," she purred, "is no object." I parked in the driveway, handed her out. She was that kind of client. Most of them are out of the car before I can get around to the door, but not Ramona Kurtz. She actually waited for me. I had the strangest sense of déjà vu going back to the days when ladies acted like ladies rather than potential power brokers. Kind of refreshing.

I opened the picket-fenced gate of a brick garden path that gave entrance to the wraparound verandah. The Muñoz house—all right, the Painted Lady . . . why would she call it the Painted Lady anyway? Fabulous colors, she said. True, its basic color was what I call beige but Hector called "old ivory," and its elongated, louvered shutters were a "jade gray-green," while its bracketed overhangs were "sun-kissed coral" and its wrought-iron stanchions were "ebony black," but the architectural style was Italianate and that was the way the Italians did things; I guess that was the reason Ramona Kurtz called it the Painted Lady. The house wore its colors like movie star makeup.

To the practical eye, Lady was a two story, symmetrical, stuccoed, four-dormered building of concrete block on the first floor and wooden shingles on the second, with an attached four-car garage and house-length verandahs front and back. (That's the way we do things in Florida. The concrete block resists termites and keeps varmints away. We don't do celars here in Florida, we set houses on concrete slabs.)

Ramona Kurtz stood looking and making cooing noises, and when she wasn't cooing, she made purring noises. I was expecting it, and sure enough, there it came: she said, "Oooh, I've really fallen in love with this house! Even before I get inside. It's so—so—me!" And she tucked her arm through mine and took us shoulder to shoulder along the brick walkway, up the flared entry steps onto the wooden front porch pillared with Doric columns, past the segmental arched windows and shutters and an elliptical fanlight underneath four second story dormers and a parapeted sable-end roof (I copied all that off the Muñoz brochure, sounds good, doesn't it?), and through the double-carved wood and beveled glass doors. As we walked, she said, "Are you from here, Lowell? You don't sound Floridian. Not that there's any specific Floridian sound, people come here from all over, don't they? What I mean is, you don't sound Southern."

I went into my canned speech. "I'm originally from Queens, New York; been here in Fairland, the class city of Central Florida, nine years now. Real estate's been the name of my game for close to twenty years. Let me



show you the outstanding features of this house, the house you call the Painted Lady. That's a cute name, the Painted Lady. Don't think I've ever heard it before."

"Oh, it's a well-known name among architectural aficionados. So tell me, Lowell—I may call you Lowell, yes? And you call me Ramona. Are you married?"

She caught me off stride, sent me off spiel. "No. I'm what you'd call an old batch." I shut my mouth after that. Sometimes I'd throw in a little joke here, like how my friend Arty says I'm so ugly no woman would marry me or I'm so mean no woman would marry me, some quip like that, but that results in the woman saying, "Oh, I don't believe that. You're not ugly at all." Chit-chat like that, and I didn't feel like indulging in repartee with Ramona Kurtz. Can't say why, there was something about her.

So I pointed out that the first floor of the Painted Lady featured a high-ceilinged foyer with an Austrian crystal chandelier, a formal dining room, and a great room (living room) with a walk-in fireplace. (Should you ever want to walk into a fireplace—maybe to warm your buns? Okay, okay, I'm no comedian. But at least that remark got her to remove her arm from mine.)

The fireplace was flanked by leaded-glass french doors leading to the rear verandah. The right wing contained the kitchen with a nook and a pantry, a half bath, and a utility room. The left wing held the master suite with more french doors looking out on the verandah and two walk-in closets, private double toilets with bidet, and an almost pool-sized Roman tub with a Lucite-enclosed multiheaded shower. The four-car garage was attached but separated from the main building by a courtyard entry, where the Carolina jasmine provided privacy and smelled great, too. At the top of the divided staircase, the second floor offered two roomy bedroom suites, each with its own bath, a recreation room big enough for both pool and ping-pong tables, and a bonus suite (for the live-in maid?) over the garage. As I pointed out to Ramona Kurtz, "It's not a big, big house—its rooms are large and its ceilings are ten feet high, but it's not what I'd call a barn of a house. It's a manageable house. Built for elegant living for the smaller family."

"I see there's a pool out back." Ramona Kurtz peered through the Carolina jasmine.

"And a Jacuzzi and a cabana guesthouse. It's handy for visiting relatives, maybe. Like a mother-in-law?" When she wasn't paying attention, I studied my client. She was one goodlooking woman. Arty would go ape. But there was something that turned me off, just something . . .

Ramona twinkled at me. "No mother-in-law," she said. "I'm not married."

"Is that so?" Divorced, I supposed, but didn't ask. I figured her age for maybe late thirties . . . all right, early forties. Hair—kind of copper-colored. Eyes, green. Skin, she had what George Costanza on *Seinfeld* would have called a "rosy glow." Figure? From what I could see from the

fit of the off-white linen slacks and the matching tank top, through the see-through animal print shirtjacket, she surely rated nine, maybe nine and a half.

She smiled at me. "Interested?" she asked with what amounted to a leer.

I grinned back like a sheep and opened the Painted Lady's patio doors, stood back to let Ramona Kurtz enter. She walked in like a bride to the altar and stopped abruptly, bringing me up very short indeed. "My goodness," she said. "There's someone here."

We'd entered the great/living room with the huge fieldstone fireplace. Standing in front of the fireplace was the builder, Hector Muñoz. With him was a pudgy blonde, and lurking behind the blonde was Bethel Parsons. Bad show. Two possible buyers, one house. Potential conflict—and Bethel Parsons to boot.

Bethel Parsons was my bet noire, that's the way my recent-college graduate secretary Debbi Bolster put it. Bethel Parsons had been awarded Realtor of the Month enough times to guarantee her the title of Realtor of the Year, for whatever that was worth, which publicity-wise was plenty.

"Well, Lowell." Hector put out a manicured hand to shake mine; his smile reminded me of the song "Mack the Knife." "How nice to see you, but I didn't expect . . . sorry, Mrs. Stevens," this to the blonde lady, "we must have confused our appointment schedule. But such things can happen, I regret to say, when a house is—" chuckle, chuckle "—such a hot property."

"I love it," trilled Mrs. Stevens in a voice that could have come from Barbie the doll. "I just *love* it. But where's the kitchen? I'm one of those rare women who spend a great deal of time in the kitchen."

"Oh well, in that case . . ." Bethel Parsons took but a moment to give me her standard battlefield glare before she hustled the lady toward the right wing. "Wait till you see the range, it has double convective ovens, and the walk-in freezer has zone controls . . ."

Hector Muñoz stayed with us. He was eyeing Ramona Kurtz, who was ogling him back, so I introduced them. "Oh," she cooed, "you're the man who built this *fabulous* house. That's what it is, just *fabulous*! I'm so pleased to meet you."

"I'm pretty proud of it myself, if I do say so. Nothing but the best in this dwelling, I can tell you that. Nothing but the best." And he showed all his capped teeth in a smug smile. If he'd been wearing suspenders, he would have stuck his thumbs inside them and snapped them.

"It reveals a great deal about *you*, Mr. Muñoz. This house. It represents your public exterior. That's what Carl Jung said. He viewed houses as a symbol of the psyche. I believe he was referring to the occupant of the house, but it must apply even more to the designer, the builder. The house is the self we choose to display to others." In her enthusiasm she reached out and touched Hector's arm. I waited for him to swell up and crow.



Instead his smile grew puzzled, and he asked, "Carl Jung?"

"The famous Austrian psychologist." Pat, pat on the arm.

"Oh. *That* Carl Jung."

"Oh, Hector," Bethel Parsons chirped from the kitchen doorway, "a question. Please?"

"Scuse me." Hector went kitchenward.

"Y'all come back now, you hear?" Even I knew better than to say y'all to just one person, but Hector didn't mind. He just beamed, nodded at Ramona, and went on his way.

Ramona Kurtz looked as though she might follow, but I called her back. Not a good idea to join the party there; mixing would-be buyers was like putting the Yorkies in with the pit bulls only you never knew which was which until they tangled. I steered her in another direction. "Shall we take a look-see out back? The landscaping is of particular interest, one of Mr. Muñoz' relatives, a cousin I believe, is a landscape architect . . ."

"I just love the way the porch wraps around the house." Ramona talked as we walked. "It has the feel of those old Southern mansions . . . Edward Hopper—he's the famous artist who specialized in paintings of houses, you know—he believed that the porch is a transition between private and public, past and future. Doesn't that just grab you? Let's see, the asking price is five hundred thousand. Do you think Hector would accept an offer of four hundred? Cash money?"

What I thought was that Hector had a live one in the kitchen and he wasn't going to drop his price until he stopped playing the field. The other thought I had was, hadn't she said price was no object? Some people just plain love to dicker, she must be one of those, but in this case she'd brought her dickering gear to the wrong bowling alley. I was trying to find words to discourage her hopes without dashing her bargain basement plans when I heard the birdlike (make that crowlike) tones of Bethel Parsons from the back porch of the Painted Lady. "You can go home now, Lowell," she announced. "Mrs. Stevens and Hector, we've got a deal!"

"No!" screamed Ramona Kurtz; it was a primeval scream. "This is *my* house. The Painted Lady is *mine*! I was here *first*. Tell her, Lowell! Tell her—" and she ran past me, pushed Bethel aside to disappear into the building. "Mr. Muñoz! Hector! This house is *mine*. I was here *first*!"

"What's wrong with that woman?" asked Bethel Parsons.

"A disappointment in love," I told her. "You see before you a woman with a broken heart." I can be as hokey as the best of them when I'm in the mood. And I was in the mood. I could just see my big fat commission flying off on the wings of a painted bunting (the only bird I could imagine belonging to the Painted Lady). Looking at Mrs. Stevens, the fraulike, ordinary looking Mrs. Stevens who stood now at Bethel's side wearing a smug smile, I felt a twinge of another kind of regret. I'd quickly come to realize that the Painted Lady was a special sort of dwelling. It really belonged to a woman who would see a porch as a transition between past

and future. But that's the way it went in the real estate business. I should know. I've been in it long enough.

I maybe gave a thought or two to Ramona Kurtz in the next few days. She didn't want to see any other houses, thank you. She wasn't sure she wanted to move to Fairland at all. All this I learned by e-mail because I was unable to reach her even by telephone. So eventually I gave up and worked other acres, other developments. I sold a lakefront lot and a links-side condo in the next month or so, enough to keep me going, living as I did on my real estate earnings. Self-employed entrepreneurs don't have pensions to fall back on, they live life on a wing and a purchase agreement. Little did my new secretary know how shaky was the cash flow that provided her weekly stipend; like show business, a posh front is everything in the real estate game.

The big realtor seminar in September was being held in Orlando that year; among the major topics for discussion was the rapid growth of sale-by-owner companies. I could have taken the podium on that one myself. Sure, the owner can sell his property if he or she markets it right, and if he or she relies on the sell-it-yourself company's website and sales booklets, he (or she—I'm not gonna keep this up, you know what I mean when I say he) might get what he expects and then again he might not. He can finalize the sale without a hitch—if he's willing to work at it, if he knows the do's and don'ts, and if (this is the biggie) he's lucky. Sellers should start out with copies of real estate contracts, they should take note that almost everything is negotiable, from who pays closing costs to who gets the repair bills. All details should be put in writing because once you sign the contract you're headed for closing and it's too late to say, "But I didn't mean *that* . . . I meant *this*!"

Oh yes, I could give the prospective seller a few tips. Don't let strangers just walk in, make appointments. When making appointments get names and phone numbers, and call them back to make certain they're coming. Don't let anyone know your comings and goings, don't blab about security information, and do ask for an I.D. from anyone who sees the house. Remove all valuables like guns, jewelry, silverware, collections, and never leave strangers alone in the house. Isn't all that common sense? And pay the bucks to have a real estate attorney look over the contract before you sign. That's after you've made sure the buyer can come up with the moolah via mortgage or whatever. It's work, I would tell them, and you've got to use your smarts. If you think you can do it, all the best. But you might find out that I come cheap at seven point three percent for sales over two hundred thou.

I was on my way to the discussion of upgrades on courier fees, recording fees, title insurance premiums, and underwriting fees (little items that nearly always surprise both seller and buyer) when I ran into Bethel Parsons. Literally. Suddenly there was a woman in my path, and lo and be-

hold, it was Bethel all duded up in a sunshine-yellow suit. I thought she looked like a dried-up daffodil. Time to get your hair touched up, I could have told her if I wanted to be nasty. But feeling benevolent, I said excuse me and hi.

"I've been looking for you," she said.

"I've been around." I tried to figure what kind of a deal she wanted to cut, but I couldn't come up with any listings that might interest this big-time operator.

She whipped out a pair of sunglasses and hid her eyes behind them. "Whatever happened to that woman who behaved so badly at the Muñoz house?"

"Ramona Kurtz? I don't know. I guess she's left town. You broke her heart, you know. She was crazy about the Painted Lady."

"The Painted Lady?"

"That was her name for it. I suppose Mrs. Stevens is happily playing Martha Stewart in her new kitchen."

"I wouldn't use the word happily. She's being stalked, she says. By that woman—Kurtz, you said. She's going to call the police for a restraining order."

"Stalked? You're kidding. Is the woman paranoid? Who'd stalk somebody just because they bought a house?" And even as I asked the rhetorical question, I answered it. Ramona Kurtz might. She'd said she loved the Painted Lady, and if I worked at it, I could believe her, and I could even believe Mrs. Stevens. There'd been something a little strange about Ramona Kurtz.

"So you don't know where she is?"

"Haven't the least idea. She was staying at the Lakeside Inn, but the last time I called they told me she'd checked out. Without a forwarding address."

Bethel rearranged her brochures and notepads and prepared to depart. "Well, thanks anyway. How are you doing?"

"Oh, fine. I'm doing just fine. How about you?"

"Fine. Just fine. Busy, very busy in fact. Well, see you around."

"Right. See you around." And as we parted, I realized that I hadn't run into Bethel at all. Instead of being the runner-into, I was the runnee. She and Mrs. Stevens must be pretty agitated about Ramona Kurtz. Wherever she might be.

Where she might be was right there in Fairland. I found that out when I ran into her a couple of days later, again literally. I'd gone into Loving Companions, which is a pet store, not a dating club, for a bag of the special dog food they carried called Old Folks Chow. My mostly-Airedale Gordon, who is somewhere in the vicinity of seventeen years old, couldn't hack the regular canned stuff any more, so I had to pay premium for this special mix that digested easily. Every time I went to Loving Companions I went in with the thought that one of these days I was going to put Gor-

don to sleep, but then when I'd bought a twenty-five pound bag and hoisted it into the trunk of my car I figured I wouldn't do it just yet. Not until this bag of Old Folks Chow was gone—then maybe. But the next thing I knew, I had another bag, and so it went. Maybe it was because when I looked at his hairy dogface and he looked back at me out of trusting amber eyes, I putted off to Loving Companions; I guess I'm just a sucker. As Arty says.

Anyway, I was going around a corner with the Old Folks Chow in my shopping cart when I bumped somebody. That somebody let out a little yelp, bringing me to an abrupt stop and causing me to say, "Sorry, ma'am. Jeez, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

At first I didn't recognize her. She'd changed the color of her hair, and she'd gained some weight. She was all decked out in some long-skirted grape-colored outfit, and she had a snake wrapped around her neck. So, like I said, I didn't recognize her. Mostly I was looking at the snake. It was a big snake.

"It's Mr. Ames, isn't it?" she said, and then I looked from the snake into her face and recognized those eyes. "No, I'm all right. You startled me, that's all. What do you think of my boa constrictor? Isn't he a beauty? I'm thinking about buying him and taking him to North Carolina with me."


"You're moving to North Carolina?" I couldn't take my eyes off the snake.

"Yes. Tryon. It's lovely country, and I've found another painted lady. Not the same, of course. This one's brick, and I've always thought there was something kind of institutional about brick. Still, you can't have everything, can you? I don't think I'll buy the snake after all."

She began to unwind the reptile from her torso. It swayed toward me, so I backed off with my cart, saying, "Well, it's nice to have seen you. Good luck, Mrs. Kurtz. May you have a long and happy life with your painted lady." I probably broke a shopping cart speed limit getting out of there. There definitely was something strange about Ramona Kurtz. As far as I was concerned, Tryon was welcome to its new resident.

Having thought that thought, I forgot all about her. That's the way it is in the real estate business. Clients come and clients go. Painted Ladies don't come along very often, however, but I kept looking. One day I'd sell one of those beauties, and my reputation would be made. One day . . .

It was just about then that I met Peggy Bolster. Debbi's mother. Debbi's widowed mother. Peggy could probably tell you the date and time of the meeting, women keep track of things like that. "It's the anniversary of our first . . ." whatever, and, "Ooh, they're playing our song!" Stuff like that. Anyway, all I remember was walking into my office and there was this really nice looking lady wearing a pink dress with a lace collar, a lady with soft brown curly hair and smiley blue eyes and dimples. To me she looked just like the subject of an old song that went "I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad . . ."



"Oh, hi, Mr. Ames. This is my mother, Peggy. She's moving to town."

I guess I've got to explain why I was a bachelor at age forty-seven. You tell somebody that these days when we're all into psychoanalysis and they figure you're a real mama's boy, which I'm not, or that I go for other guys, which I don't. The thing was just that I'd spent all my adult life selling real estate and supporting my mother until she passed away in a nursing home for Alzheimer's patients three years ago. Somehow I never could fit the gal in with the job timewise or moneywise. Arty said my problem was that my expectations were too high, and he could have been right.

I've got some what you might call old fashioned ideas. If so (and I don't say it isn't so), Peggy Bolster looked exactly like the kind of woman who might—just might—fit the lease requirements. For one thing she was a widow, a little younger than I but close enough in age so that we were on the same wavelength. And she was so darned pretty. And sweet—yes, in the full meaning of the word. If I could create an ideal woman, she would be Peggy Bolster.

All right, you guessed it, I'll bottom-line it. I fell for her. All the way. I stopped doing a lot of things I used to do, like meeting Arty down at Barney's Bar and Grill to watch the ballgames, and watching reruns of *Seinfeld* every weeknight on cable. I ceased carrying home an armload of books from the library every two weeks and taking Gordon to the park any day I didn't have an appointment. I even stopped reading the morning paper through and through each day, which is why I missed the obituary that Bethel Parsons told me about at my wedding reception.

I had to dig back in my stack of papers for recycling to find the article. It said that Laura Louise Stevens, age thirty-nine, had died suddenly at her home on Buena Vista Lane after encountering a nest of baby rattlesnakes in her garden. It told when and where the funeral was to be held, and it named her husband and a couple of sisters as survivors.

Rattlesnakes, I thought. Hmm. Snakes, I thought. Hmm. . . . Even baby snakes have poisonous venom, they're born equipped, as it were. And if there were enough of them and if nobody found you in time for some antivenin, which was the case, Bethel said, it was bye-bye Laura Louise Stevens in her rose garden. I wondered if my pet store sold baby rattlesnakes in quantity like some sell ladybugs. Maybe so. For snake farmers. Somebody somewhere must grow snakes. Seemed to me I'd read something about guys who milked snakes for venom to make antivenin, something like that. But then I thought, Lowell, you are letting Ramona Kurtz and the Painted Lady thing get to you, forget about it. Thank your lucky stars it has nothing to do with you. You and your bride are about to fly off to Lauderdale to board a ship for a honeymoon cruise. Say adios to Mrs. Stevens, may she rest in peace, and begin your wonderful new life. That's what I told myself, and that's what I did, we did. I had to begin thinking "we" instead of "I."

Our first ointment insect came up when we got back. Peggy had moved

into my bachelor apartment—good-sized, two bedrooms and bath-and-a-half, fifteen by twenty foot living room with a dining ell that I never used, and what I called a Pullman kitchen, just my speed. Mostly I worked the microwave and used the dishwasher maybe a couple of times a week, no need to waste water and energy for a couple of plates and a coffee mug. But women are nesters and Peggy found the kitchen.

"It's frustrating, Lowell darling. I want to come up with all these wonderful dishes for you, and I just don't have the proper equipment. Pots and pans, for one thing. Storage is totally inadequate. And the apartment is simply not suitable for entertaining. Not that I plan to do a *lot* of entertaining, Lowell dear, but sometimes I'd like to have the girls in for a couple of tables of bridge, and we owe people for all the prenuptial parties they gave us. You can see how that could be difficult, can't you?" She put her little hand with its pearly pink fingernails on my arm and looked up into my face with those pure blue eyes. "And while Gordon is a darling dog, he's old, and I'm afraid he smells. You don't notice because you're used to it, but to strangers it could be offensive. You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure. I can see that," I said. "I never needed more space than this. I set my computer up in the second bedroom and turned it into a home office. And Debbi fits right into the dining ell, filing cabinets and all. Maybe I should turn the whole thing into an office and we should get a little house . . ."

"A house! Oh, Lowell! You are so *sweet!*"

Peggy kissed me, and I had a quick flashback to Leigh Hunt's poem: "Say I'm weary, say I'm sad; say that health and wealth have missed me; say I'm growing old, but add—" It ends with "Jenny kissed me!" but I changed it to "Peggy kissed me!" I vowed to find her the nicest little house in the whole territory, one where Gordon could live his days out in a nice outdoor doghouse. If I couldn't find the perfect house for us, who could? After all, I'd been in the real estate business for almost twenty years.

But Peggy found what she wanted herself. She found the house she fell in love with the same day that Bethel Parsons called to tell me that Mr. Stevens was suing Hector Muñoz and Bethel herself for the death of his wife, who died, he claimed, because neither the builder nor the realtor had warned them about snakes on the property. "Lowell, I tell you that there were never any reports of snake infestations in the entire development—never! Nowhere! You know what I think? You can tell me I'm bonkers, but I think that crazy woman who wanted the house had something to do with this. Do you have her address in North Carolina? Tryon, you say? Hector is hiring a private detective, and we're going to hunt that crazy woman down. Now he can't sell that lovely house for love nor money, and you know I'm not a rich woman, Lowell. What realtor is? Oh, I'm so effing mad I could stand in front of my office and scream!"

You guessed it. The house Peggy stumbled across was the Painted La-



dy. "I absolutely *love* that house, Lowell. And I understand it's selling for a song, something about a woman who owned it dying from a snakebite. Isn't that the silliest thing you ever heard? Spreading a rumor that a house is hexed, a bad-luck property? We can buy it, can't we? I've got the money from my former husband's insurance policy, I'm sure we can afford it one way or another, Say you'll buy it for me, Lowell? I just adore that house! They call it the Painted Lady."

"Well," said Arty when I told him about it, "you've done every single thing she wanted. You had the big wedding instead of the little wedding. You took the cruise ship to the West Indies instead of the drive to the Grand Canyon, though you had told me that that was a lifelong ambition. I expect you'll buy the house. Like I said, you've done everything else she wanted. Why change now?"

"I've got this feeling," I confessed, "this feeling that Ramona Kurtz is out there somewhere just waiting."

"That doesn't really add up, does it?" Arty took a long drink of beer, burped gently. "If the crazy woman were still yearning for the place, why didn't she step up and buy it? You said you can get it at cost."

"I don't know." I stared into my mug of draft beer, I only drink draft. "I've just got this feeling."

"Well," said Arty, "look at it this way. If eventually all this honey-do business begins to get to you and you can't take it any more—after all, this is your first time at being a husband, and you've got no idea how long you'll feel so giddy—who knows, one day something could happen to the new Mrs. Ames, like an accident, you know. You won't need to feel guilty. You've got a built-in excuse. The Painted Lady did her in."

I took a long, long drink. "You know, Arty, sometimes you're a jerk. A real jerk. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Arty. He grinned. "I know. How about another round? The little lady let you off the leash long enough for another round?"

I signaled the bartender. "And this one," I said, "is on me."

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FICTION

REDEMPTION

Jim Ingraham



Illustration by M. Bilokur

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/02
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I was driving on blacktop down a winding canyon of trees looking at barbed wire stretched off little crooked posts alongside the road, patches of gravel at the edges of asphalt, birch trees on grassy mounds, ivy-covered stone walls. It was rural Maine.

I had driven more than a mile off the highway and had yet to see a house or a sign of life other than a weasel that scrambled down a bank into underbrush when my lights startled it.

A tiny red reflector appeared in the distance, then two concrete posts, then reflections on a windshield. As I approached, a man got out of a black SUV and held up his hand. I lowered my window, started to get out but was told to stay in the Jeep. He had a deer hunter's rifle cradled on his forearm.

"I have an appointment," I said.

"Let's see some I.D."

He got a flashlight off his hip and shone it around inside my Jeep, then leaned into me and shone the light on my driver's license, allowing me to study broken capillaries on his chin and a couple of cavities in tobacco-stained front teeth. He smelled of whisky.

"Duff Kerrigan," he said. "I heard of you. Turned in a cop for drug dealing a few years back, got skinned, and bought yourself a tin badge. What's your father's name?" handing the license back.

"My father?"

"You don't know his name, you don't get in," he said.

"His name was Frank."

He took a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket, unfolded it, shone his

light on it, studied something on it. "Okay," he said, putting the paper away—a man with apparently a hell of a memory. "The house is half a mile down this road. Go around back. There's a sign."

"Servants' entrance?"

"Something like that," he said, shining dirty teeth at me.

There was no sign. There was only a light over a back door and a strong scent of pine trees and something animal in the breeze that slid at me along painted clapboards. I could hear something flapping out there in the darkness, maybe a flag.

I suspected it was Juliana who came to the door. Her name had been in the clippings the lieutenant had given me, described by a newspaper writer as a shy Latina housekeeper.

"This way," she said, giving me a hurried glance, then looking at the floor as she led me through a laundry and utility room.

I followed her past white walls and a kitchen doorway into a large room where a thin woman was seated on the bench before a concert grand Steinway, bony arms out from her hips, bony hands clutching the front edge of the bench, glittery dark eyes watching me.

I had trouble convincing myself she was the Cecilia Hill whom I had watched on television trading baseline volleys with Billie Jean King. That Cecilia, called "Chilly" by the fans, was as fleshed out as a long-distance swimmer, lean at the hips with strong runner's legs.

I tried not to stare at the one leg coming out of the skirt or at the

prosthesis leaning against the piano. I tried not to think about how beautiful she once had been.

Cancer—discovered after she collapsed on court at Wimbledon. Even if you're not a tennis fan you must have heard of it.

"This the man you sent for," Juliana said, not looking at me or at Chilly, again staring at the floor.

"You don't look like a private detective," Chilly said. "They're little bald guys in rumpled suits. Or else obese. And they drink a lot. You must work out. You look fit."

"I watch sports a lot on TV," I said.

"Mike said you could be trusted. Come in, come in," impatient, wiggling fingers at me, no rings on them, no ornaments of any kind on her, and no makeup.

The Mike she referred to was Myron Kadish, a lieutenant in the local police department, a friend we had in common, although until this day I hadn't known she and Mike were acquainted.

Before going to the long sofa she pointed me toward, I scanned the room—draped windows, framed paintings, an odd mixture of furniture, all of it expensive. And a second woman seated in the far corner under what looked like a Velasquez, in a dark skirt and long-sleeved blouse, legs crossed at the knee, hands in her lap, something stern and forbidding in her expression. If you visit an inmate in prison, you get one of those sitting just out of earshot watching your every move.

"I'll go upstairs now," Juliana said. "It's okay?"

"It's fine, Juliana," swinging around, the bandaged leg stump pointed at me. Everything that had once made her beautiful was still there, but tired now with yellowed skin on the cheekbones, a lingering sadness in the eyes. She still had the thick black hair that had helped make her famous, although maybe now it was a wig—Mike suspected she was back on chemo.

"Do you know your way around the north country?" she asked. "Mike wasn't sure. And your Jeep's got a four-wheel drive?"

"I've done some camping around Moosehead."

"West of that, up by Jackman."

"I know the area."

"And you'll go alone?"

"That's how I work."

"Mike gave you those clippings about my brother Timmy? They called him a fool, but he wasn't. He just laughed a lot. He even laughed at my father if you can believe that. I think of him as eccentric, maybe even kind of bizarre," and she laughed. "You know about the money?"

"Mike mentioned something, but he thought it was a myth."

"It wasn't." She pointed at a book on the mahogany table in front of me, a book of cartoons about deer. The book smelled moldy.

"Open it," she said. "The paper just inside the cover. Open that."

I opened a folded sheet apparently torn from a spiral notebook. Above the fold there were several crooked lines and pencil marks. Below the fold in large block letters was her brother's name, the first name centered above the last:

TIM
HILL

"It's a map," she said. "That's the way he made his signature. It looks dumb, but he hated doing things like other people."

"A map of what?" It looked like no map I had ever seen, just random lines and odd little marks.

"Where he had the accident," she said. "The ranger found it under some old boards where the cabin used to be. It escaped the fire. You can't decipher it. Nobody can. Only me. Because it's what Timmy and I did when we were kids." She made a small kick with her leg. "Mike said I could trust you."

"To do exactly what?"

"Unless the rodents got it, I know where the money is," and that brought a glint of triumph. Despite everything she was suffering, the child was still strong in her. Signs of pleasure had trouble getting to her face, but you could see them in there.

"The money really exists?"

"I didn't think so, but now I know it does. I called it a myth to keep people from going up there and rooting around. It's what was left from a trust. It can't be much, but he was frugal. He didn't smoke, didn't eat much, didn't have a girlfriend—at least that I know of. All he spent money on was equipment and gasoline and provisions. Three or four times a week he'd buy a meal at a roadside cafe up the highway.

"See that square with the spirals over it? The spirals are smoke. The square's the cabin. And just north of it, on the side, there's a thing like a

skull? That's where the money's buried. It's under a rock. It's thirty-two strides from the edge of where the cabin was. Count those little dots. That's how we marked out the treasure when we played pirates."

She looked happy telling me this, remembering some childhood fun, sitting there forcing the pain out of her face.

"Did the ranger see this map?"

"He didn't know what it was, just marks on a paper and Timmy's name. The name on it is why he brought it to me."

"Why was the ranger up there? That's pretty desolate country. Something going on?"

"They worry about fires. It's been dry. Where Timmy's cabin was is about the only clearing large enough for the helicopter. It's all woods and hills in there. My father got the land from some guy in payment of a debt. It's not worth much, but Timmy loved it, loved working on it, being alone. He only came back here when the snow got too deep."

"Mike said there's a logging road."

"It goes only to the bottom of the slope. That's where our land begins. Everything we own up there is mountainside, a couple of hundred yards up to the first shelf. That's where the cabin was. Then it's a hundred yards or so before you get to granite outcroppings."

According to Mike, what she called the first shelf is where they found Tim's body. He'd been clearing land on the upper slope when his bulldozer tipped over, pinning him under it, killing him instantly.

The police said the accident was caused by Tim's inexperience using heavy equipment. The guy who rented the bulldozer to him wanted to go up there and show him how to use it, but Tim wanted to do it by himself. I guess he lied to the guy about his experience.

"He was very independent," Chilly said. "My father . . . well, my father pushed him too hard. Tim's whole life was a stubborn rebellion."

Although building a ski resort in the area was hopelessly impractical—the site was miles from the nearest public road and accessible only by crossing land owned by a German paper company—Tim had spent three summers making long, vertical clearings on both the upper and lower slopes, hoping apparently to build a ski resort one day even though there wasn't enough flat land to put buildings on. Maybe a little pro shop, but nothing that would allow him to compete with established resorts.

"People laughed at him," she said, "called him pathetic, and that made me furious. He was doing something meaningful to him. Whether it made sense to other people, who cares? He wasn't hurting anyone."

"How did people know about it?"

"One of those feature stories in the *Press Herald*. A reporter. I don't know how she found out. Timmy refused an interview, but they ran the story anyway, I suppose because of me."

"How'd the German paper company feel about your brother's—"

"Their lawyer tried to stop him

from crossing their land, but the state controls that road for fire-fighting. He couldn't have used it commercially. There'd be no other way to get up there except go around the back side of the mountain, which would mean putting in ten miles of road. Maybe he planned to do that. I don't know."

"He couldn't buy some of the company land to put a lodge on?"

"I tried, but they wouldn't talk about it."

"I keep this?"

"Of course."

I folded the map and tucked it in my shirt pocket. "I'm curious why it's me you sent for," I said. If the job involved nothing more than going into the north woods to fetch some buried money, why hire a private detective? Guys like me are expensive. But I guessed money wasn't of concern.

"Mike picked you, not me," she said. "His wife and I are old friends. I needed someone who wouldn't go blabbing on television and bring reporters and cameras out here. That's what I don't want. I may not seem famous any more, but there are crazies out there trying to get pictures of me. They'd sell them to the tabloids. That's why I keep dogs."

"And why you put that man out front with a rifle."

"What man?"

"The guy out at the gate."

"There's a man out there?" She turned to the woman at the back of the room. "Did you know there was a man out there?"

"Maybe it was Harold," the woman said.

Chilly turned to me. "Did he have dogs?"

"Not that I saw."

"Was he short, walked with a limp?"

"I'd say he was six feet tall. I didn't notice a limp. Maybe in his forties. Had a black SUV—a Ford, I think—parked right at the gate."

As she stared at me, I sensed she was more angered than annoyed, which surprised me. She didn't seem worried. Out of curiosity I asked, "Do you know my father's name?"

"No. Should I?"

"It's something the man asked me. Maybe you ought to take it to the police."

"No. The last time I called the police about a prowler, a hundred people converged on me. I had to drive them off with dogs."

"Let me mention it to Mike. How many people know you have this book, this map?"

"I don't know. The ranger said he described it in his report. People probably saw it."

"The ranger seemed trustworthy?"

"I don't know. Are you trustworthy?"

"I try to be."

We talked a while longer. I decided to leave when she appeared to be getting tired.

"Anything more I have to know?" I asked.

"I don't care about the money. It's not the money. But if thieves get it, it'll just be something more people will laugh at. Timmy wasn't a fool. I don't know what he was doing up there, but I know it made sense to

him. I know he wanted to prove himself to my dad, and he never could." And that brought tears and a helpless look of embarrassment. "My father thought he was a fool and said so." She looked away and ran her hands over her skirt, hiding the bandaged leg, a kind of sad regret in her expression. Sports writers in the old days had called her heartless, and fans had embraced the idea, seeing her as a ruthless athlete savagely beating the competition. That wasn't true. She was obviously a very sensitive woman.

I took her hand. "If that guy's still out there, I'll find out who he is and what he wants."

"Run him off."

"I can do that," I said.

I didn't have to. There wasn't a sign of him at the gate or anywhere on that country road. I looked for the black SUV all the way into the city. By the time I pulled into Mike's driveway, I was pretty sure it wasn't my 4WD Jeep that had got me picked for this job. There were snakes in the thicket as my father used to say. Chilly's anger at the mention of the man with the rifle suggested that she knew who he was.

It's what I suggested to Mike as I followed him into his kitchen where Laura, his wife, waved at me from a high stool at the sink—a lanky dark-haired woman in a cotton robe and slippers, her head turbaned in a white towel. She was peeling potatoes.

"You want something more than coffee?" she asked. "It's no trouble."

"Coffee only, if it's already made."

"Why? You like it stale? How long's it been since you had anything more than a cheeseburger?" She was getting off the stool, one of her slippers coming off. She freed herself of the other one and kicked them both into a corner.

"Weeks," I said, smiling as I joined Mike at a table in a little alcove across the room. He was massaging the outside of a jelly glass that held four dandelion blossoms probably brought in from the fields by one of their daughters.

"Chilly likes you," Mike said, across from me in a T-shirt, an easy-going guy with the body of an out-of-shape wrestler. "About the trouble—" he laughed, holding up both hands in surrender — "I didn't know."

"The hell you didn't."

"He's lying," Laura said, putting coffee in front of me. "He was afraid if you expected trouble you'd alarm Chilly." She poured milk into my cup.

I turned to Mike. "Know what?"

"Honest to God," he said, "I didn't think he was involved in this. I knew he *might* be, but . . ."

"Who?"

"Not the guy you saw at the gate. That was probably Clarence Nester, works for him. I mean the ex-husband, Derek Caine."

From clippings Mike had given me at his downtown office, I knew about Chilly's problems with her ex-husband, a sore loser at their divorce settlement. He had demanded half her fortune, claiming it was his promotional talents that had made her successful. When the judge awarded him nothing, he

screamed an obscenity and spent ten days in a jail cell kicking the walls. A few days after the divorce became final, someone broke into Chilly's house and trashed her trophy room, destroying all the mementos she'd collected since childhood. Timmy had seen a man running from the house, and although he was unable to make a positive identification, his description of the fleeing man helped convict Clarence Nester, who was sent to prison for six months. Derek was named co-conspirator, was given a suspended sentence and threatened with prison if he should ever again harass his ex-wife or go onto her property.

"Okay," Mike said. "Something about this ranger finding a book and a map two years after Timmy's death didn't sound right. I didn't think Derek was pulling a prank. It didn't enter my mind. I knew that Nester blamed Timmy for his conviction, but I didn't expect to see him out there harassing Chilly. He's stupid enough to hold a grudge that long; but . . ."

"How would he know I was coming out there?"

"I don't know."

"And that business about my father?"

"Window dressing, trying to act like a security guard."

Again perched on the stool, Laura asked, "Did she talk about her brother?"

"All the time."

"Timmy was all the family she had after her father died."

"The mother?"

"Died when Chilly was just an

infant. She lived to please her father. He was obsessed with making his children famous. He talked about it all the time. Chilly was young enough to handle it, but Timmy . . . I can hear that madman yelling at Timmy, 'Make a name for yourself, you idiot! You're wasting your life!' And Timmy would do something like run out to the backyard and yell his name for all the trees in the woods to hear. The old man's obsession ruined Timmy's life."

"The father wouldn't let him be himself," Mike said. "That's all his problem was. You gotta leave kids alone, let them grow at their own pace."

"Don't start with that," Laura said.

Mike looked at me and laughed.

"So I'm a Jewish mother," Laura said, dropping a potato peeling into the sink.

"I wouldn't have you any other way, dear." He turned to me, slapping both hands on the table, blue eyes fixed on mine. "It's possible it wasn't Nester out there with the rifle, but I'll give odds it was. If you take this job, maybe you can get evidence against Derek that'll put him in prison. He's a classic example of an over-age spoiled brat."

Late afternoon the following day I was in deep woods north of Jackman, a few miles from the Canadian border, standing on spongy moss in a clearing at the edge of a swamp, listening to water flowing through nearby rapids, and enjoying what Thoreau called the "sweet and embracing fragrance" of ever-

greens, almost forgetting what I was there for. I was watching a fish-hawk diving into a pond beyond the swamp when I heard rotor blades and saw an old Huey coming toward me, a big buglike relic of the Vietnam War. It hovered over the clearing where I had parked the Jeep, then banked off toward the mountain and disappeared behind the high branches of an oak. The pilot either wasn't interested in me or was going up the slope to wait—he was probably the ranger, probably saw my Jeep coming up the logging road . . . and maybe knew who I was and why I was there. After my conversation with Mike, I couldn't accept as coincidence the ranger's having brought Chilly the map and the presence of Nester at Chilly's front gate.

I had to climb over barbed wire and make my way through junipers and blueberry bushes on one of the cuts on the lower slope that Timmy had made—a hundred foot wide clearing of underbrush and scraped ledge so strewn with boulders only an avalanche could have made it fit to ski on.

I reached the shelf where Tim's body had been found and located the outline of what had been the cabin. Patterns among the boulders behind it matched nothing I could find on the map. I was grumbling to myself, staring out across miles of trees at the moving shadows of clouds darkening a lake and a small mountain in the distance, fighting off resentment at having to turn over every boulder in the clearing, wondering where I'd spend the night if it got dark before

I found anything, suddenly looking up at the Huey descending on me, almost beating me to my knees in the thrust of the downdraft. I watched it settle into a cloud of dust and a man in a green uniform get out under revolving rotor blades. He beckoned me toward him, a pugnacious guy about the size and shape of my tubby little grandmother.

"Something special you're up here for?" taking gloves off, tucking them into a back pocket. He had a state shield on his sleeve, the words FOREST RANGER across it in white letters.

"Just looking around," I said. "Is that a problem?"

He kept walking toward me, hands in his pockets, sizing me up.

"Not if you don't plan to camp out or light a fire. Something special you're looking for?"

"Wondering where Tim Hill had that accident two years ago. His bulldozer tipped over."

"Before my time," he said.

"You've heard about it?"

"Yeah, I've heard about it. What's your interest?"

I smiled, offered my hand, "Duff Kerrigan." He took a few steps toward me, gave me a limp hand-shake. I thought he looked nervous. "Up there," I said, looking up the slope, "wasn't it?"

"All's I know it was there, right over there," pointing, "where they found the machine. I guess the body'd been dragged down the hill under it. That's what I was told."

"Who told you that?"

The hands went back into his pockets. He again was sizing me

up. "You from an insurance company?"

I glanced up at the second slope. It looked steeper than the one I had climbed—a lot of gray ledge, a lot of bushes, again a hundred foot wide swath through the trees. The muscles in my thighs too well remembered the struggle of climbing to this point for me to do more climbing. But I had to do something, couldn't look for the money while he was watching.

"Mind showing me where you found that book?" I said, walking toward the pile of charred timbers, noticing he didn't ask how I knew about the book, didn't even look surprised.

So he knows who I am and why I'm here. Who told him?

He showed me to a hole, maybe a foot deep. The earth around it looked freshly disturbed. The rotted timbers had recently been turned over, fuzzy white insect nests still on them.

"Wondered whether the timbers were salvageable and came across that hole," he said. "The book was right there, wrapped in oilskin and foil. Surprised the hell out of me, finding it after what's it been, two years?"

"You weren't looking for something?"

He gave me a funny look. "You mean the money? Hell, there ain't no money up here. If there ever was, it's long gone," dismissing the notion with a little too much disdain.

He hadn't had to turn over anything to know the timbers were rotted and worthless. Maybe he had-

n't found the money, but he could have been looking for it. I stood there a while, hoping he would get bored and take off. I kicked the dirt, kicked the timbers, glanced across the clearing at the sagging blades of the helicopter.

"Sure there's nothing I can help you with?" he said. "I'd take you down to your Jeep, but there's no place there I can sit down."

"You've never been to the top of that slope?"

"Nothing up there I want."

I glanced at the sun going low in the western sky. "Guess I'd better start down while I can still see my way."

"You'll just about make it," he said. "Gets dark down there faster'n up here. You can find a room in Jackman, and there's a motel over on Long Pond you need a place to stay."

And why would I need a place to stay?

When I reached the wire fence at the bottom of the slope, I saw the chopper sail off in the general direction of Moose River. I walked among shadows on the floor of the woods and was taking a pint bottle of water from a cooler in my Jeep when a bullet hit the stanchion inches from my head. Another bullet creased the frame at the top of the windshield and went singing off into the trees.

I jammed the stick into reverse and plowed into thick underbrush, then pushed my hand past the Polaroid camera under the passenger seat and got my Beretta. It could have been a poacher. It could have been someone who liked to fire at

shiny things in the woods. Could have been some ding-dong thought I was a moose. It could have been Clarence Nester. All I knew was that the bullets came from a distance, from a rifle.

I heard a car start up down the logging road and waited until I knew it was going the other way. My headlights shining on the grass between deep ruts, I drove toward the highway looking for the car, half expecting bullets to fly at me out of the trees—although a more likely place for an ambush would be down the highway toward Jackman. There were several places along there where a shooter could hide a car and wait.

I had a regional map downloaded from the net, but I didn't dare stop to examine it. I knew there was a road near a river a few miles toward Canada. I could hide there for a while, all night if necessary. I had a mobile phone, but it might not work in that wilderness. And who would I call? Not the police, not at the expense of Chilly's privacy.

A half moon in the eastern sky illuminated the empty highway clearly enough, but when I reached the river, I had to turn the headlights on to manage a sharp turn onto a gravel road that went deep into a pine grove. Unlike the logging road, this one looked traveled on—worn wheel tracks on a washboard gravel surface. About a half mile out of the pines I came to heaps of sawdust outside what looked like the remnants of a sawmill—skeletal, barnlike, unpainted buildings. I was about to enter the yard when I noticed lights flickering in the tops of trees.

I burned gravel getting out of there.

I drove past a farmhouse and turned at a grove of alder trees. Through their branches I could see pools of moonlight on the river. I came to an old trestle bridge and thundered over it on loose planking. Beyond the bridge I stopped, turned my lights off, and backed into a narrow clearing. I couldn't trust what might be ahead, and I was sick of running. The underbrush didn't screen me as well as I had hoped. Headlights were coming, and I had no time to move.

I hunched low in the seat as tires walloped the planks on the bridge. The car skidded to a stop in front of me, blocking me in. The headlights went off. Interior lights came on when the driver's door opened. Something rose above the car roof. There were rapid flashes. A bullet snapped through my windshield. Something stung my cheekbone.

I gripped the wheel with both hands and drove straight into the car, bulldozing it off the road and down a bank. Whether the shooter jumped clear I couldn't see.

I scrambled out of the Jeep, crouched in bushes in the darkness, and watched red taillights tumbling over each other as the car rolled into the river—loud hissing noises and restless motions in the water, then silence. I got a flashlight from the Jeep and crawled toward the river. Nothing came at me. I stepped on something hard. The rifle. I picked it up and hurled it way out into the river.

"Who the hell *are* you?" I yelled, shining my light into the trees. No

one yelled back. I flashed the light in every direction—at underbrush and trees, the river and the road. Then something barreled into me from the darkness.

I remember driving my hand into a face. I remember the smell of whisky. I remember being whacked in the head, lying on wet ground, coughing into rotted leaves, a ton of pain gripping my skull. I remember trying to get up and collapsing into a seizure of vomiting. I remember grabbing a foot and shoving a leg and a man, arms flailing, heaving him down the bank into the river. I remember pawing the ground for my flashlight.

When the insects resumed singing, I found the flashlight and shone it on the water. I didn't see the man. I saw two wheels and half the underbelly of the car, and green leaves moving slowly in the current.

The left front of my Jeep was crushed, the headlight smashed, but the front wheel was clear and the engine worked. I drove to Jackman on one headlight, telling myself I didn't have to report anything: the man who had shot at me sure as hell wasn't going to report anything, at least not to the cops.

In the motel room I contented myself with a bottle of Snapple and a cold chicken sandwich I had brought in the cooler. After getting dirt out of a cut on my cheekbone, I shaved and showered and scraped mud off my jeans and sweatshirt and hung them over the shower rod. I was in no mood for television or making phone calls, so I swallowed three aspirin tablets and hit the sack and, with my head on a

skinny pillow, stared at the ceiling and wondered what had happened to the man at the river. Two things seemed clear: somebody didn't want me on that mountainside, and there was more at stake in this than what might still be up there under a rock.

If it were Nester, he wasn't coming after me just for revenge against Chilly.

Next morning I was the only customer in a roadside diner at the edge of town.

"Tim Hill," I said to the waitress. "Killed two years ago working some land a few miles . . ."

"You come here looking for money," she said, wetting the end of a pencil on her tongue, shaking her head, "you're wasting your time. If there was any, it's long gone by now. I'll bet five hundred people have searched that place."

"Have you worked here a while?"

"If you mean forever, why yes," and she smiled, writing my order on a pad, dark eyes squinting behind thick glasses, not a bad-looking woman, about forty. "Haven't had anyone ask about him for a long time now," she said, going off to the kitchen.

I looked at round red cushions on empty stools along the bar, empty booths along a row of windows. I sipped coffee and toyed with grains of salt on the counter until she set toast and apple jelly and a plump omelette in front of me. It smelled good.

"Tim come here often?"

"About three times a week," she said. "In the summer."

"You get to know him?"

"Better'n that idiot wrote that story about him."

"What idiot was that?"

"In that sports magazine. Said he was slow in the head."

"You didn't think so?"

"Nobody around here thought so. A little peculiar, maybe. But he wasn't slow."

"Peculiar how?"

"Laughed all the time. No matter what you said, he laughed at it. Unless you talked about hunting. He hated guns. Found a moose gutshot way up in the woods and drove down to Jackman to get help for the poor thing. Most men would've just killed it. Cried when the vet couldn't save it. A grown man crying, sitting right over there," pointing, "telling me about it."

"I guess that wouldn't cause anyone to hate him."

"Nobody hated him around here. He was a nice man."

"Anyone ever suggest his death might not have been an accident?"

"Haven't heard that in a while. A cop asked me that about six months ago. You a cop?"

"What'd you tell him? No, I'm not a cop."

"Same thing I'll tell you." She dragged on her cigarette. "The man who rented him the bulldozer said he didn't think it happened the way they said."

"What'd he mean?"

"I don't know. Something about the way the ground looked up there."

"Know where I can find this man?"

"Santa Barbara, California, last I

heard. May be dead. He looked poorly when he left here. Went west to live with his sister after his wife died."

"He tell that to the police?"

"Have no idea. You want more coffee?"

I went back to my motel room and cleaned and oiled my gun, loaded film into my Polaroid, picked up the bedside phone, and talked a few minutes with Mike.

"I don't know," I said. "It was just a black car, maybe a four-door. I couldn't swear it was Nester, but it smelled like him."

"Probably a stolen car," Mike said. "I'll look into it."

"Make sure I don't get hit with leaving the scene."

"I'll take care of it. And you're right about the ranger. Name's Arnold Pike. He and Derek were buddies in 'Nam. Derek's father got him the job up there. So he's linked up. And so is that housekeeper Juliana. Chilly's therapist caught her on the phone with Derek. Apparently he threatened her a few years ago with deportation, so she keeps him on top of what's happening at the house. I don't want to touch it, but Laura says she may be illegal."

"And when'd you find all this out?"

"Last night. I tried calling you this morning. What's wrong with your cell phone?"

"Nothing. I'm saving the battery. So why was the guy shooting at me?"

"I have no idea. Honest to God, Duff I'm sorry I got you involved in

this. And believe me, Chilly won't blame you for pulling out."

"I don't think there's any money up there. Every rock's been turned over a dozen times."

"Then come home. Chilly'll be satisfied."

"Did you know the police were up here six months ago asking about the accident?"

"I know there was some question about whether it was accidental, but I can find out. You come home."

"Not until I take another look at that mountainside."

"You don't have to. She'll be satisfied."

"Can you think of a reason anyone would pretend to have just found that book and the map up there? The hole the ranger says he found it in wasn't two years old. Not even two weeks old. It was freshly dug."

"Sounds like one of Derek's pranks."

"If it were just a prank, why would Nester come after me with a gun?"

"I don't know, but you'd better get out of there."

"You've got Caine's and maybe Nester's prints on file. Can you check whether they're on the book and the map?"

"I can do that, but I want you out of there. Chilly'll understand."

"She didn't send me up here just to find money, Mike. I'll call you tonight."

I got Arnold Pike's address from the phone book and was told how to get there by the woman in the motel office. "Just the other side of the

church," she said. "Probably the brown shingled house down there, got a wraparound porch. It's a rental."

I had no trouble finding it. There was a yellow Corvette in the driveway behind an S-10 pickup. I saw a movement in the window. I put a hand inside my jacket and wrapped my fingers around the grip of the Beretta as I walked to the porch.

The door opened and Arnold Pike came out looking nervous, a finger raised to his lips. He didn't ask what I wanted, didn't invite me inside. Behind him in a small kitchen I could see scrambled eggs on plates at two places on a card table, folding canvas chairs pushed back, cups filled with coffee, partly eaten pieces of toast.

In a low voice I said, "Who's in there?"

He glanced down a short hallway, raised a hand to my chest, pressed me outside, and closed the door.

"Look, I got nothing to do with this," urging me past a window. "I don't know what these guys are mixed up in. But I'm not part of it."

"What guys? Who's in there?"

"It's got nothing to do with me!"

"Who's in there?"

Again raising his hand to my chest, he urged me farther down the porch. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"Derek Caine got you this job," I said. "And it's Clarence Nester who tried to kill me last night. You're involved."

His face went white. "Tried to kill you? What the hell you talking about?"

"Is Nester inside?"

"No. What do you mean tried to kill you?"

"Took some shots at me. Who's in there?"

He looked up at me like a pleading child. "Nester called me last night, said his car had broken down, wanted me to come get him. I didn't even know he was up here."

"You picked him up?"

"No. I called Derek. It's Derek inside there. Nester tried to *kill* you? Why the hell would he do that?"

"Because he had a gun." I walked around him and pushed the door open.

A man in jeans and sweatshirt was standing in a doorway behind the card table, his arms folded across the word PATRIOTS on his chest. Although I hadn't known who he was, I used to see him hanging around the police station, one of those aficionados the police sometimes attract, an average-sized, goodlooking man in his late forties wearing a wig.

"Duff Kerrigan," he said, with the patronizing smile learned in his youth at the side of an influential father, the rich political functionary called "Sugar" Caine, a friend of governors.

I wasn't surprised that Derek knew me. I imagined it was he who had provided Nester with my father's name.

"Is Nester back there?"

"Clarence?" as though surprised to hear the name. "Back there?" He turned, gave a theatrical look down the hall. "Not that I know of. You came here to see Clarence?" Smart-ass laughter in his eyes.

I wasn't interested in games. I turned to Arnold, who had come inside and was holding the door partly open, maybe hoping I'd leave. "I'm going up where we were yesterday. I want to meet you up there. And bring the chopper."

Arnold, glancing nervously at Derek, said, "I'm not on today. I can't get—"

"On or not," I said, "you meet me up there or I call in the state police. Your choice." I turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" Caine hurried to the door. "What's the problem here?" No longer the smirking bystander.

I asked, "This have something to do with you?"

"I'd like to know what's going on."

"So would I." I turned to Arnold. "I'll give you an hour. If you're not up there, I go to the police."

"Jesus, wait a minute!" Caine grabbed my arm, then quickly let go. "Is this about money? There's no money up there. It was a joke! I was just having fun with her! Come on. I didn't go on her property. Ask him. I haven't been on her property, have I?"

Arnold wanted no part of it but said, "Not that I know of."

"You were having fun? She's a sick woman! She could be dying!"

"I was just teasing her. I found that book two years ago. I didn't know she'd bring you into it. I swear I didn't go on her property."

"But you sent Nester over to Chilly's front gate with a rifle."

His face went pale. "Chilly's—what're you talking about?" He glanced at Arnold. "You know anything about that?"

"How would I?"

I said, "You didn't send him there?"

"No! Why would I?"

If he were lying, he was doing a good job of it. I had to keep reminding myself that sincerity is easily faked.

"And if you were just teasing her, why was Nester shooting at me?"

Derek's eyes widened. "Shooting—"

"Clarence took a shot at him," Arnold said.

"What!"

He really looked surprised.

I said, "If you already had the book and wanted Chilly to see it, why'd you bring it back here?"

"He didn't," Arnold said. "He asked me to dig a hole and say I'd just found it."

"It was a joke," Derek said. "I just wanted to stir her up. When I told Clarence about it, I didn't think—"

"You didn't send him over to Chilly's?"

"No! Look, I was ordered to stay away from her. I don't want to go to jail. You think I'm stupid?"

"But you're harassing her, and she's a sick woman."

That got a look of shame but nothing more. "I had the book. It was my last . . . you don't understand. She cheated me out of a lot of money." His face was like a sniveling baby's.

"They're going to blame me for this, aren't they?" he said.

"For what Nester's doing?"

"I swear I know nothing about it. I didn't know he was up here."

I was tempted to believe him.

"How did Nester know I was going to Chilly's house?"

"He talks to the housekeeper over there. She tells him things."

I watched him a few seconds. He seemed diminished, defeated. Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe he had no idea what Nester was doing.

"Bring the chopper," I told Arnold, and left the two of them in the doorway staring at me.

I didn't look for a shooter when I went up the logging road. The rifle was in the river, and Nester didn't have wheels. I just inhaled the fragrance of pines and watched feathered limbs of Canadian hemlock brushing my fenders, wondering whether Nester had used the phone in that farmhouse on the sawmill road. Maybe he was waiting there for a ride.

I was at the edge of the swamp taking pictures of the mountain-side when the Huey came in over the trees. It took me a half hour to climb on aching legs to the shelf where Arnold was waiting. Although getting away from Derek seemed to have improved his confidence, he still looked worried.

"I had nothing to do with any of that," he said. "All's I did was dig that hole."

"You lied about knowing where the bulldozer tipped over."

"I didn't want to get involved."

The second slope was steeper than the first. My thighs ached as I followed him along the border of trees, stumbling, cursing the brambles and boulders that got in my way.

At the top, under big outcroppings of granite, there was a wide, horizontal clearing crossing the face of the slope to the second vertical swath. Beyond, the ledge became huge scarred blocks of stone that would have been difficult for a bulldozer to crawl over.

"This is where it happened," Arnold said. "What the insurance guy said was, he had to lift the blade to get his machine across this ledge. It slid off into soft ground. You can see where the track sank in. The machine tipped over and dragged everything down the hill."

I thought about that a while. "He obviously got across this ledge safely a few times. You can see over there where he dipped the blade."

"I guess he went over it every day. While he was working up here, he kept the machine parked back there," pointing to where we had been walking. "The guy who rented it to him told me that."

For a while I studied the area, looking at trees Tim could have removed to make his passage easier. Why crawl over a treacherous ledge when cutting down a few trees would have created an easy passage just below the ledge?

I had a lot of questions. Why was the ground the tracks slid into so much softer than the hardpan just below it? Why did it look more like a trench than an indentation made by a sliding bulldozer track? Bulldozers don't make foot-wide trenches. And it was too narrow for a backhoe bucket. My guess was it was made by pick and shovel, and maybe by someone who knew Tim crossed this ledge every day and

occasionally slid off. It wouldn't have been difficult to turn a slide into a tumble.

"Was Nester ever up here?"

"He told me once he had helped clear some trees."

"Helped Timmy? That doesn't make sense. He hated him."

"All I know is what he told me."

"The soft dirt here look funny to you?" I pointed at the trench.

Arnold stared at it, hands in his pockets, and said nothing. I could assume he had discussed all of this with the man who had moved to Santa Barbara, and maybe that was why he was nervous. Maybe he had talked about it with the police.

I took five pictures of the trench, four from high angles, one from ground level.

As we went down the hill, I noticed the marks and scars the bulldozer must have made as it cascaded down, carrying boulders and underbrush and Tim's body with it. It wasn't hard to conclude that Tim Hill's death had not been accidental.

Down on the shelf I pointed into the southeastern sky. "You ever come in from that angle?"

"I did once. Sudden downdrafts out there. I come in the other way."

"How about three or four hundred feet out? Safe enough?"

"Why? You want to go out there?"

"I want to get some pictures."

It was early evening when I pulled into Mike Kadish's driveway. The kids had just gone to bed. When they heard my voice, two little faces appeared at the edge of the doorway.

"Want to play tiddlywinks?" the oldest one, Bethany, asked. They both giggled and danced into the doorway. They were in pajamas.

"Get back into bed!" Laura yelled.

"We want to see Mr. Kerrigan."

"You've seen him. Now, get back to bed."

They wiggled fingers at me. "Bye-bye!" Giggling, they ran back to their room.

"I won't take no for an answer," Laura said, going straight to the stove. "It's pot roast and cabbage and boiled potatoes."

"My favorite." I joined Mike at the table.

"How'd you get that nick on your cheekbone?"

"Shrapnel." I told him what had happened and described what I had learned on the slope. I showed him the pictures of the trench.

"It's probably what the police are troubled by. They want to talk to you."

"They suspect Nester?"

"More than suspect him. They just can't prove it. They know it wasn't an accident, and they know Nester had been up there. It's an open case. They're eager to talk to you. I told them what you told me. They don't think they can prove he caused Tim's bulldozer to tilt over. But they hope with your testimony they can at least get him for attempting to murder you. He would not have tried so hard to kill you unless he were covering up something. And what else if not murdering Tim? He had motive, means, and opportunity. According to the guy I talked to, he blamed Tim Hill

for getting him convicted of trashing Chilly's game room."

"Am I square with them? I didn't report that thing by the river."

"Yes, you did. You reported it to me. The car you knocked into the river was stolen, and Nester's prints were all over it. We've got him on that. He'll do prison time, no question."

He went into the other room, came back, and handed me a card with a name written on the back. "He'll want to see those pictures. He's in the courthouse in Portland. I'm pretty sure he's the one handling the investigation."

I leaned back so Laura could set a plate in front of me. "You want wine, beer, coffee, what?"

"Beer go good with this?"

"I have no idea." She got a bottle from the refrigerator and handed it to Mike, who unscrewed the cap.

"I can do that," I said.

She laughed.

"You feel slighted?"

We talked a while and agreed that until the police made a solid case against Nester there was no need to tell Chilly he'd taken a few shots at me. "I don't think Derek knew what Nester had done. But it's pretty clear that Nester was afraid I'd gone up there to look into the reasons for Tim's death. That's why he was at the gate. He wanted to make sure who I was. He wouldn't think Chilly would hire a private detective just to look for some money. And I really don't think Derek had anything to do with it. It's just hard to believe he's such a baby."

"Not if you know him," Laura said.

Mike asked, "You intend to see Chilly tonight?"

"As soon as I leave here. And thanks, Laura. That was really great. I was starved."

"It's time you got married again," she said.

"When I find a woman like you."

"They broke the mold, honey," tapping my head as she took my empty plate away. "I'll call Chilly, let her know you're coming."

We talked a while longer. "I doubt that idiot husband of hers will trouble her any more after this," Mike said. "So your trip wasn't a complete failure. Just by going up there you accomplished a lot."

"More than you know," I said, and left the two of them with questions in their eyes.

I was let into the house by Chilly's companion, the one who had watched me from the back of the room. I didn't ask what had become of Juliana. Chilly was waiting for me on the sofa. There was some kind of a crocheted thing covering her legs. She looked exhausted.

"No money?"

"That place has been gone over a hundred times. If there ever was any, it's gone."

The news didn't cheer her but she seemed to accept the truth of it. "Well, thanks for looking. I appreciate it."

She was about to dismiss me and seemed puzzled when I just sat there smiling at her.

I showed her the pictures I had taken from the swamp, handing them to her one at a time. The first was a view of the mountainside I'm

sure she had seen many times. It showed the vertical swaths, but not very clearly. She handed them back, remarking that underbrush had begun to fill everything in. "I suppose trees will grow in them again and everything will be forgotten."

"It wouldn't take much to keep them as clear as when your brother made them," I said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because he wasn't up there building a ski resort."

I gave her the pictures I had taken from the helicopter. At first she looked at them as anyone would. Then she sat up abruptly and put her hand to her mouth and screamed, "Oh my God! Oh my God!" tears flooding her eyes. "Oh my God!" She spread the pictures across her lap and lowered her face over them, stared at them, and sobbed. She handed the pictures to her companion.

Very clearly from where I had taken the pictures, you could see that the four vertical swaths on the

top slope and the five on the lower slope, connected by horizontal clearings (including a V between the third and fourth swaths on the upper slope) spelled:

TIM
HILL

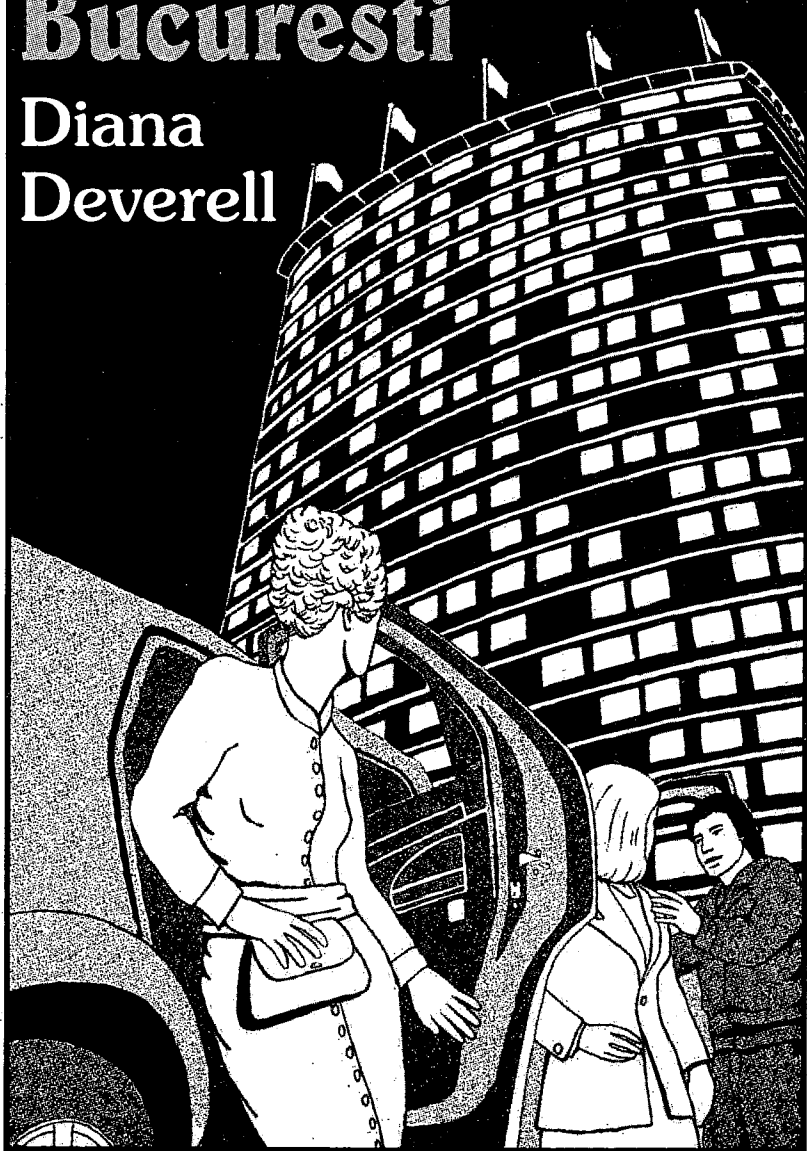
"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" turning to me, all signs of illness having disappeared from her face, reaching out to me, pressing her wet cheeks into my face, her thin arms around my neck. She could not have been happier. Her brother had not been up there wasting his time building anything for skiers. In his own ironic way he had been doing what his father had wanted him to do. He had been up there making a name for himself.

"When snow is on the ground, those letters will be perfectly clear from out where I was in the helicopter."

"And maybe they'll be seen from even farther out," Chilly said. "Out where my father is."

Hokey Pokey Bucuresti

Diana
Deverell



National Police Cadet Stela Dragomir leaned over the desktop and moved her finger to the next line of the flier inviting goodlooking women to apply for jobs outside of Romania. Her voice rose inquiringly as she read aloud the boldface print, her wide-eyed aquamarine gaze trained on the hiring agent seated on the far side of the desk, a Gypsy-handsome thirty-year-old who called himself Vlad.

FBI Special Agent Dawna Shepherd didn't understand Romanian, but she knew her undercover partner was asking Vlad about each of the openings advertised for "Girls—single and very pretty, young and slender, apply in person with valid passport."

Vlad shook his head mournfully and muttered, "*Nu, nu, nu.*" Right now he had no positions for models or dancers or choreographers or gymnasts as the flier promised. He sighed, then spoke a couple of tentative sentences to Stela.

She blew air across her full lips, a snort of disgust.

Vlad responded soothingly, sounding to Dawna as if he were downplaying his last remarks, a Romanian version of no big deal.

Forehead wrinkled thoughtfully, Stela tapped the flier twice against the desk. She crumpled the paper decisively, exaggerating the motion so that even a speech-and-hearing-impaired person would understand that none of those jobs was available. Of course not. Vlad was a small-time opportunist who recruited females for the international prostitution circuit. This first

interview was designed to weed out choosy women, those who weren't yet truly desperate for work. But he wasn't going to reveal that to a pair of attractively gullible young things.

Stela slipped out of her cheap blazer, moving away from the desk to the center of the room and fluffing her honey-colored curls. Her expression grim, she held up her index finger toward Dawna in a way that made it clear the women had one last option. Stela slowly unbuttoned the top two buttons of her white nylon blouse, revealing generous cleavage as she moved her sculpted pelvis in an unhurried bump and grind. Telling Dawna that the only work available was in a strip bar, Stela held out her hands, palm up: should we take it?

Dawna screwed her face into a worried expression, the way she'd look if she were thinking, oh no, this isn't how I see my new life in the West. But Dawna didn't say the words aloud. An essential part of her cover as an impoverished Romanian woman was that she could neither hear nor speak. Fingering the collar of her high-necked, long-sleeved dress, Dawna shook her head unhappily to signify that yes, she wanted to leave Romania, but she didn't want to take off her clothes in front of men.

Stela turned to Vlad, her voice plaintive, following the script she and Dawna had worked out earlier. Surely there was other work for her shy older sister.

Vlad shrugged his shoulders. No other jobs, take it or leave it.

Stela faced Dawna, her hands



moving in what they both hoped would appear to be the sisters' private sign language. Speaking in glacially slow Romanian, Stela synchronized her hands and lips as if she were sounding out the phrases she was signing.

Dawna frowned and shook her head vigorously, but her motion slowed to a stop as Stela's plea continued and her expression and body language grew more beseeching. Stela's round, childlike face was at odds with her full-bosomed, broad-hipped physique. The exuberantly healthy girl-woman combination radiated sexuality. She was perfect bait for this trap, which was why the Romanian National Police had plucked her out of basic training and plopped her into it.

How Dawna had ended up in nowhere Romania trying to get hired as a sex slave was another story—one in which Dawna's FBI colleague Brian Kennedy played a suspiciously large part.

Brian was one of three U.S. agents assigned to the international Human Trafficking Task Force based in the Romanian capital of Bucuresti, or Bucharest as Dawna had been taught in school. One of the Task Force's goals was to shut down the procurer networks operating in Romania and other former Soviet Bloc states. The task force had had some early success, rescuing a half dozen women from forced prostitution. But powerful criminal groups were behind the global trade in human lives. Romania's feeble witness-protection program couldn't guarantee safety from retaliation by the Russian

mafia. The rescued victims were poor and naive but not crazy. None was willing to testify against the men who'd enslaved them.

So the Romanian National Police elected to set up a sting operation. All on their own, Brian Kennedy claimed. Dawna didn't believe him. The sting was a favorite FBI tactic, one Brian had used successfully back in the States. Dawna figured that Brian had given the idea to the Romanians and laid out for them how a sting would work. Ideally a female police officer would go undercover, job-hunting in the provinces. She'd bust the local recruiter. To save himself, he'd rat on his buddies, who'd then turn on each other. Bingo, the cops could roll up the whole network and shut down the franchise in-country. With luck—and with cutting-edge on-site training for the undercover policewoman.

Brian and his two FBI colleagues were in Bucuresti strictly for liaison, observing how the task force handled cases with a direct U.S. connection. Legally the agents couldn't provide training or technical assistance for a local law enforcement field operation. That kind of help was available close at hand, however, from Quantico-East, the FBI-run International Law Enforcement Academy in Hungary. The Romanian National Police had immediately requested ILEA assistance. And Instructor Dawna Shepherd had been assigned to provide one week of training to the female officer going undercover.

Brian had advised the Romani-



ans to ask for her specifically, Dawna learned later. Because of her skills, he claimed. After all, Dawna had run more successful stings in the U.S. than Brian had. Plus, her years playing basketball—including four as a Lady Longhorn at UT—had made her both a skilled team player and an excellent coach. All true, yet Dawna had a bad gut feeling about Brian. He wasn't telling her everything she needed to know about the operation. She considered begging off the assignment. She had a good excuse. Her teaching duties at the academy left her only a single week in October when she was free to travel to Bucuresti. And one week—five days, really—was the bare minimum amount of time she needed to prepare an experienced police officer to go undercover. She could have argued that five days was cutting it too close—the ILEA should lend the Romanian cops an instructor who could devote more days to the job.

But professional pride won out, and Dawna let Brian get away with his sloppy maneuvering. She was the best qualified agent for the job—she couldn't deny it.

But not even Dawna could work miracles. Brian had “forgotten” to mention that Stela Dragomir was not a veteran but a cadet, fresh from the police academy. She'd come to the National Police by way of the wildlife service. One look and Dawna saw that what the poor baby needed was hands-on, in-your-face training with the coach calling every play from the sidelines. No way could Dawna ready a brand-new player to go out on the floor

and then turn her back on the game. She'd scrapped her original training plan and had written herself into the script as Stela's handicapped older sister. Stretching the rules big-time, and Dawna knew it. She was supposed to be only a consultant to local law enforcement. She couldn't legally participate in their undercover operation. But as Dawna saw it, this way she was technically a silent observer of Stela in action. Sure. Just along for the ride.

This morning she and Stela had ridden two hundred kilometers northeast from Bucuresti. They'd come to Vlad's two-room office in a storefront on the outskirts of Tulcea, a town of a hundred thousand that billed itself as the Gateway to the Danube Delta. Europe's largest wetland west of the Volga, the delta was a refuge for sturgeon, otter, and wild boar. It also served as breeding, resting, and feeding grounds for such rare and threatened birds as the black stork, white pelican, and pygmy cormorant. But bird-watching was no great attraction in mid-October, when a skim of ice covered the waters. From now until spring tourism was dead, and Tulcea's economy had to depend on enterprises like the multistory chicken factory across the street from Vlad's office.

Which looked like a travel agent's office with posters on the walls advertising foreign cities and new vinyl and chrome furniture suggesting a prosperous operation. Yet even with the doors and windows tightly closed, the air in the room had the stale scent of long-de-

cayed poultry guts. No wonder unsophisticated women in the surrounding countryside were still responding to Vlad's too-good-to-be-true offer of escape.

Stela stopped talking and took Dawna's hands in hers, staring into Dawna's eyes. Dawna gave her head one last puny shake. Then she brought her chin down slowly, a reluctant signal that Stela had convinced her.

Vlad's chair squeaked as he shifted position, turning his face to the wall, but not quickly enough to hide his smug smile from Dawna. With little effort he'd ended up with the pair of them. Stela was more to his personal taste—that was obvious from the way his eyes kept returning to her breasts. But he'd wanted Dawna, too. He'd done his market research just as Dawna had. The bony fashion model look was in demand, and Dawna had costumed herself to accentuate her willowy six feet three inches. She'd teased her unruly blonde curls into a golden cloud atop her head. A seemingly endless line of jet buttons marched down the front of her ivory-colored dress from collar to hem. The narrow skirt and her strappy spike-heeled shoes shortened her athletic stride to mincing steps. She knew her muteness was no handicap so far as Vlad was concerned. There was no foreign language component to any of the jobs he'd advertised. Once they got to the West, women who spoke only Romanian would have to communicate with gestures and body language, just as Dawna was pretending to do.

She watched as Stela and Vlad noisily negotiated the next phase of the "hiring process." Back at National Police Headquarters, surrounded by her male colleagues and FBI agents, the young cadet had been much quieter. Even during the brief time Stela had been alone with Dawna, the younger woman had limited herself to one- and two-word responses. Now her mouth seemed to be on automatic fire as she blasted Vlad with a barrage of words that he returned, syllable for syllable. The Romanian language shot by Dawna, its emotional charge hidden in the bursts of strange sounds. She strained to make out their meaning from Stela's expression.

So far Vlad had followed precisely the same scenario he'd used to "hire" three other Romanian women who'd already been rescued by the task force. Even the stripper job offer was scripted, moving the applicants a step closer to the line they'd be crossing later, from dancer to hooker. Now Vlad would be telling Stela that his jobs in the West had to be filled by tomorrow evening. Leaving no time for Stela and Dawna to contact family or friends, sorry, but it was imperative they depart Tulcea immediately to connect in Bucuresti with their west-bound transportation.

Stela's apparently guileless face was twisted in a credible expression of distress. Vlad made a soothing hand motion, softening his tone as if to say don't worry, I'll handle everything. He extended his arm, and Stela hesitantly placed the two falsified passports on his open

palms. The fictitious sisters Madalin and Marilena Basescu were putting their fate in Vlad's hands.

His fingers closed around the passports, and he rose instantly. Muttering something that included a word like telephone, he went into an adjacent room, shutting the door tightly behind him. A dead-bolt snicked into place.

Stela turned the empty chair to put her back to Vlad's door. She sat, her head close to Dawna's, signing as she whispered, "We go at once to Bucuresti."

In Bucuresti all three Romanian women had joined a marathon road trip through Yugoslavia to northern Italy. As soon as their van cleared Italian customs, passports and cash were seized, and each woman was told she owed ten thousand dollars for her travel expenses. Unable to pay, the women were taken to Milan's movable human auction and "sold" to bidders willing to cover the costs. Pimps and brothel owners, the bidders "persuaded" the women to work off their debts through prostitution at locations throughout Italy.

Dawna and Stela would follow the traffickers' route only to Bucuresti. And not even to Bucuresti if anything set off Dawna's internal alarm. Not that she was sure she'd know what was alarming in this creepy country with its ugly, bullet-scarred concrete buildings and garish ads for the Bank of Transylvania. And a language where she could reduce ten minutes of non-stop multisyllabic conversation between Vlad and Stela to six English words.

Dawna heard the rumble of Vlad's voice through the wall. While he was occupied, she could get some answers from Stela. "Where do we go after Bucuresti?"

"Europe. I ask where, Vlad say he tell us more in Bucuresti."

Dawna frowned. "What else did he say?"

"He wanted to know about us. I tell him our story." Dawna had concocted a legend that relied on Stela's familiarity with the surrounding region. The bogus Basescu sisters had grown up in the sparsely populated wetlands, their family dependent on the fish and reed harvests. The two women had come to Tulcea in search of better-paying employment.

Stela crossed her eyes, looking like the universal village idiot. "We are ignorant peasants, he thinks."

Dawna chewed on her lower lip. The other women had been promised jobs in Italy. But Vlad hadn't told Stela where they'd be going to work. Dawna didn't like that deviation. Human traffic did not move only west from Romania. And Turkey was technically in Europe. No way was Dawna going to end up chained in the hold of a slave ship crossing the Black Sea to Istanbul. "We can't be sure he'll take us to Bucuresti."

Stela clicked her tongue against her teeth, a dismissive noise. "This Vlad, he is not so smart. And he is only one little fish. No problem for us." She held up the backs of her clenched hands, thumbs touching, and then sharply turned each fist thumb side up, as if snapping a stick—or a spine—in two. "We

make him drive us to Bucuresti, and we catch many fish.”

Using an angler’s metaphor, but with her lips drawn back over her teeth and her eyes narrowed, Stela didn’t look like a fisherman to Dawna. No, at that moment Stela was all huntress. Which didn’t make sense. As a wildlife warden Stela hadn’t killed animals, she’d protected them. So where had that bloodthirsty visage come from? And how had Dawna missed the aggressively ambitious side of this young cadet?

The deadbolt on Vlad’s door snicked again, and he was back in the room, reaching for his leather jacket, urging the two women to put on their coats, gather their handbags, head toward the door. Outside Dawna purposely stumbled into Stela, tangling her capacious satchel in the younger woman’s legs. The two of them spent an extra thirty seconds on the sidewalk in front of Vlad’s office, checking one another for injury, brushing off the satchel, and otherwise guaranteeing that someone in the surveillance van a half block away would notice.

A minute later Dawna was climbing into the rear of Vlad’s four-wheel drive Ford. Vlad gave all his attention to Stela, copping a feel as he buckled her into the front passenger seat. Stela batted his hand away and giggled flirtatiously, pretending to enjoy Vlad’s attentiveness. Dawna had been right to veto a wire for Stela. Stela was doing all the talking, and back home she’d have been the one to wear the body mike. But Stela’s body was the

main attraction—and distraction—making the risk of discovery too great. Which left it to Dawna to play the shy and shrinking violet who could wear the wire undetected. She carefully positioned herself to capture Vlad’s words on the surveillance van’s taping unit.

The trio of Romanian cops in the muddy transport van had kept a watch on Vlad’s office while Dawna and Stela were inside. They’d also attached a directional transmitter to Vlad’s SUV. Now the van would be discreetly following, ready to close in if he took a wrong turn.

Which he hadn’t so far. He was headed for the main highway to the capital. When they got within range of Bucuresti, Dawna would be able to reach Brian Kennedy directly by using the cell phone hidden in her satchel, an extra safeguard.

The National Police had also staked out Bucuresti’s Club Drakul, the bar where Vlad had made his last three deliveries. As soon as Dawna and Stela got inside and determined that they had a bunch of bad guys in one place, they’d call in their backup team to handle the take-down.

Three hours to get there, Dawna figured, Vlad moving fast, the Ford rocking along the potholed road. Despite its relative newness, the car smelled sour, like used towels left to mildew in a damp pile, fabric never completely dry. It was after four now, the light going and a chill mist smearing the windshield, Vlad trying to drive, run the wipers, chat up Stela all at once. The Romanian conversation rattled

against Dawna like stones hitting the undercarriage of the vehicle.

Her quilted coat rustled as she moved uneasily in her seat. What were Vlad and Stela talking about? Dawna hated not knowing. Especially now, after seeing how convincingly Stela could play a part. Before, Dawna had believed in that baby face, in Stela's innocence and lack of guile. But quiet, docile Stela had disappeared, replaced by an assertive take-charge woman with an affinity for violence that was unexpected in an untested cop.

She caught only a few words, place names mostly but none in Italy. Vlad was listing cities farther north, the fleshpots of Europe.

Where the demand for white women—especially for Romanian and Ukrainian women—was at its peak. Whites were the hottest commodity now, replacing Nigerians and Asians at the top of the market. And the profits to the pimps and brothel owners were enormous. Buy a woman for five hundred or a thousand dollars, put her to work serving fifteen to twenty clients per day at fifty dollars apiece, keep her working twenty-five days a month, you make your initial investment back twenty times over. A perishable product, use her up before she spoils.

Imagine the Basescu sisters, as afraid of the police as they were of their captors, stripped of money, identity, and language and kept in that brutally coercive environment. How long would they resist the job being forced on them? And what would be the point? To flee back to Tulcea and the wetlands where

their future was no brighter? No, once a poor woman stepped into this quagmire, it sucked her in, pulled her down, down, down.

While men like Vlad got rich. They had to be stopped.

But maybe not by Dawna tonight. Even Vlad's slight deviation from his usual script made the situation iffy. And Stela had turned into a wild card, talking too much, making Dawna wonder what she was up to. Could she count on her? Dawna was no longer sure.

What she suddenly became sure of at seven o'clock that night was that she had to get herself and Stela away from Vlad.

That certainty came to her when he pulled abruptly into the passenger unloading zone fronting a flashy Bucuresti hotel. The high-rise tower rose smoothly upward for twenty floors, the building gently curved like a cut-out from a massive tin can, each floor outlined in dark gold neon against the gloomy sky. The Vegas-style structure was an unmistakable landmark that Dawna knew was more than thirty blocks from the seedy Club Drakul on the west side of the city.

Vlad was out of the car handing his keys to the uniformed parking attendant, opening Stela's door, motioning Dawna to exit. He'd reached his destination. Another change in Vlad's established pattern—one change too many.

Dawna trailed Vlad and Stela toward the entrance. In her peripheral vision she saw the surveillance van claim an open space beside a fireplug. Then she was through the revolving doors, squinting at the



sudden brightness. An enormous circular overhead light reflected off the marbled interior, the floor pattern reminding her of a giant-sized roulette wheel in tasteful shades of ivory, gold, and rust with a potted ficus tree at its center. The usual well-groomed and expensively dressed high rollers were clustered in all-male groups of three and four around the room. The five-star hotel was a mecca for Eastern Europe's new monied classes—international businessmen, drugs and weapons dealers, and television journalists on per diem.

Dawna seized Stela's right arm. With her free hand, she waved at the discreet marker pointing the way past the bank of elevators to the restrooms and started Stela marching in that direction. Catching on fast, Stela tossed a phrase at Vlad over her shoulder. Probably something along the lines of "be right back."

A lie, Dawna would make sure of that. Glancing behind her, she saw that Vlad had stopped at a sand-filled canister that sprouted cigarette butts. He slapped at his jacket pockets as though looking for his smokes. The hallway ahead of Dawna angled to the right. She yanked Stela around the corner and saw that beyond the restrooms a neon exit sign glowed above the door to the parking garage. She was relieved to find an easy out—a quick way to escape from Vlad without being seen. That gave her three, maybe four, minutes to find out from Stela if anything could be salvaged from the operation. Dawna pulled her into the ladies' room.

It was a marble haven with rosy lighting and gold fixtures, the air delicately scented with sandalwood. After checking to be sure she and Stela were alone, Dawna turned on a pair of faucets. The plumbing complained, and tap water thundered against the marble sink. "Why did he bring us here?" she whispered harshly.

Stela's soft voice was eager. "He takes us upstairs to meet some Russians."

Dawna blinked.

"Russians? Here?"

Stela nodded energetically. "Two very important businessmen, Vlad say. From a Moscow entertainment syndicate." Stela's Romanian accent distorted the word to "seen-de-kot," but Dawna understood. "They open many new clubs in the West. Need beautiful girls like you and me. Vlad say we are very lucky. We will be the first from Romania to work in these fine clubs."

Dawna recalled the place names she'd overheard during the drive to Bucuresti. Frankfurt. Brussels. Amsterdam. So that's what Stela and Vlad's conversation had been about. The big city circuit. The slickest prostitution operations moved their women between legal brothels in different locations. Regular rotation kept the product fresh, kept the clients coming back. An expensive strategy, requiring a steady and dependable source of prostitutes. Which might explain why the Russians had come to Bucuresti. They could be negotiating with Vlad and his ilk to set up a new supply line directly from Romania.

Stela was watching Dawna's face. She must have seen the moment when Dawna worked it out because she beamed and said, "We go upstairs, catch some very big fish. Perfect timing, no?"

Perfect, yes. Now that she understood Stela's agenda, Dawna was all for it. Damn, she wanted to collar those Russians. But she was the coach here, the one supposed to keep Stela from fouling out. She shook her head. "Too dangerous."

"Very dangerous," Stela agreed. "Worse for the women already upstairs." Her whispered s's hissed in tune with the gushing faucet.

Other women. Of course there'd be more. "Do you know how many?"

"A dozen, Vlad say, counting us. Tonight the Russians fly all to Brussels."

Upstairs ten women bound for hell. And at least three talent spotters like Vlad. "Only two Russians?"

"Maybe a guard, too, I don't know."

Ten women at risk and a whole covey of bad guys waiting to be bagged. Dawna hated to pass that up. In the mirror she saw her narrowed eyes, bared teeth. Another huntress, just like Stela. No wonder Stela had made her nervous—Dawna knew too well the hazards of a go-for-broke playing style.

Although the stakes were bigger than Dawna had figured, she hated relying for backup on the second-stringers outside in the van. But maybe she didn't have to. She pulled the cell phone from her satchel, tapped in Brian's number. He answered at the first ring. "Change of venue," Dawna said.

"I know where you are," Brian replied. "Wire's working, and the surveillance team is standing by. The rest of the crew is en route. I'll be with them, ETA five minutes."

Everything working—a sign, then, one reading "go for it." Dawna's voice grew more urgent. "We're in the women's john right now. One more minute, we'll head upstairs. There's a big meeting going on. Probably three more local guys plus two or three Russians. Stela will give you all the details she can over the wire."

"You two play it cool," Brian cautioned. "We'll come in behind you."

"Come in easy, they've got ten women up there, too."

"Got it," Brian replied. "Leave your cell phone on."

Dawna slipped the phone carefully into her coat pocket. She reached deeper into her satchel, extracted the compact Beretta she'd hidden there, and tucked it into her cloth belt, centered at her back. She caught Stela's grin in the mirror. Weapons definitely did not fit with the Basescu sisters' legend. But Dawna had brought her pistol along anyway. For self-defense only, that was the rule for FBI agents overseas. Well, she damn sure intended to defend herself tonight. Looking sternly at Stela, she tapped the center of her chest to indicate the mike. "The floor, the room number. How many people in the room. Say it all loud, right here. Inside, we protect the women. Let the others handle the men."

"I know what to do." Stela twisted off the faucets and led the way through the door.



Down the hall and back around the corner they found Vlad standing where they'd left him. He looked angry, a half-smoked cigarette twitching impatiently between his lips. He stubbed the butt into the sand, hustled the two women to the elevators and into an empty car, and punched the button for the twentieth floor. Stela cooed with excitement, as if she were thrilled to be rising so high, one level below the penthouse bar. She was equally ecstatic when they reached Room 2021, its double-doored entry bearing a brass plaque that proclaimed it the Ionescu Suite.

Vlad's knock was answered by a thick-necked goon with a Soviet-style hedgehog haircut and major hardware holstered under his left arm. Ex-KGB, Dawna figured, now bodyguarding for the mafiya. He grunted and motioned Vlad to raise his arms. Muttering in Romanian, Vlad let himself be patted down. Ignoring the women, the gunsel moved back into the room. Vlad straightened his leather jacket and waved Stela and Dawna through the door first, closing it tightly behind him.

Dawna followed Stela into a spacious sitting area. A linen-draped buffet was set up in the center. Two copper-clad soup tureens sat atop Sterno heaters, flanked on one side by an array of bowls and on the other by a breadboard sporting loaves of fresh rye. The air smelled of cooked beets, an odor that normally nauseated Dawna. Tonight it made her stomach growl. The other women must have been equally famished, she realized. All ten were

seated, scattered across the overstuffed couches and chairs to Dawna's left. Each woman held a soup bowl, and the arrival of three more people didn't cause any interruption in the clink of spoons against porcelain.

Nor in the rattle of ice cubes against crystal. To the right of the buffet six men clustered around a portable bar. The two important businessmen were easy to spot; one tall and thin, the other short and fat, both with luxuriant dark hair expertly styled and oversized gold links on their French cuffs. The gunsel had positioned himself behind them and folded his arms like a sentry.

The three other men at the bar were younger, shaggier, more casually dressed. Vlad's counterparts, Dawna figured, her guess confirmed when they greeted him by name.

Stela kept up her patter, turning to Dawna to make loud remarks, presumably about the room and the people in it. Stela was a natural, Dawna thought, the way she put her whole self into it, drawing all the attention as they'd planned. Her rounded body appeared soft, but Dawna could tell from the way Stela moved that she was in good shape, her compact frame covered by muscle and sinew. She was too short for basketball, but that low center of gravity would work well in contact sports. Though probably only Dawna was imagining Stela in real athletic endeavors. Already the shorter Russian was leering lasciviously and bobbing toward her.

Moving past her, Dawna real-



ized. Going not for Stela, but for Dawna. Dawna snorted in disgust. Just what she needed, a runt in love with heights. And drunk, too, moving unsteadily. He was close enough to her now that she could smell the vodka coming out his pores. She took a step back.

Her spine was only inches from Vlad's chest. She stopped herself from retreating farther. She tensed her muscles, ready to twist out of the Russian's way. But she wasn't fast enough. He was rubbing against her, his face level with her breasts. His hands reached for her upper arms. Dawna moved, but her timing was off. The Russian's heavy hands landed on her upper chest. Trying to regain his balance, his fingers bunched up the silky fabric. He dragged clumsily on the front panels of the dress. Jet buttons popped off like bullets. The front of Dawna's dress opened to the bottom of her rib cage.

Her hands flew up as she tried to hide the microphone pinned to her camisole. She saw at once she hadn't been quick enough. The runt's eyes opened wide. The blariness vanished, his gaze clearing. His lips moved, and Dawna heard a gabble of Russian. The man had spotted the mike. He'd drawn exactly the correct conclusion. He'd sounded the alarm. And now he was trying again to grasp her biceps.

Like a post player going for the rebound, Dawna lifted her elbows. That shook the little guy loose. Before he could regroup, she brought up her right knee hard, catching the Russian below the belt. He doubled over, groaning.

Behind Dawna Vlad hissed, and she could feel him readying himself to grab her. She rounded on him with her elbows, smacking him hard in the jaw. He cried out and stepped back.

She spun away, eyes on the room. The other men were frozen in place. She had to take charge before they figured out what was going on. Her hands scrabbled behind her back, going for the Beretta. Her fingers closed around the grip. She pulled, but it didn't come free. The barrel was caught in her cloth belt.

The gungsel reacted, finally—and fast. By the time Dawna had untangled her weapon, the gungsel was barking orders. And before she could raise the Beretta and aim at him, she saw a Colt Commander gleaming in his hand, the barrel pointed at her.

She let her gun hand fall to her side, no longer threatening. But she didn't drop it to the floor as she guessed the goon had ordered her to do. She wanted to buy more time, give Brian and his crew a chance to rescue her. But how much time did they need? More than she could give them, she realized. Her back-up wasn't even on the same floor yet. She was going to lose this one. She was taking Stela down with her. Despairing, Dawna's gaze went to the younger woman.

And discovered that Stela knew a play Dawna hadn't taught her. In motion now, Stela whirled from the buffet table. Dawna caught her breath. Raised above Stela's head like a saber, the bread knife gleamed in the mellow light. Stela was out of the gungsel's line of vi-

sion, but he sensed her movement. His eyes flickered toward her, and the weapon wavered in his hand. He steadied himself, rasping out another barrage of orders. He leveled the barrel of his gun once again at Dawna.

Her breath escaped her in an inaudible sigh. The goon hadn't seen the knife. She and Stela had one more play before the buzzer. They might yet score if Stela moved fast enough.

The steel made a faint whistling noise as it parted the air. Stela sliced down full force on the goon's wrist. Dawna heard the thwack as the blade hit bone.

The gungel screeched. His cannon thudded to the floor. Moaning in agony, the man stumbled back against the buffet table. The tureen of borscht toppled over, and soup cascaded across the tablecloth, turning the white linen crimson. The liquid splashed noisily onto the carpet. Dawna saw Vlad take a step toward her. She raised her weapon fast, centering him in her sights. He stopped cold. From the floor the runt moaned. His hand shimmied toward the weapon lying a foot from him. Dawna kicked him hard in the side. He yanked his hand back.

Stela snatched up the Colt. She drew down on the four men near the bar.

"Tell them all to lie face down on the floor," Dawna said to Stela. "Hands at the base of the neck—" She stopped. Stela was already doing it. Dawna had drilled her on that, just in case. The girl was a fast learner.

Vlad joined the men on the floor. The gungel crouched with them, cradling his wound, weeping pitifully. Keeping them covered, Stela backed toward the door, pulled it open. A second later the Romanian cops crashed through the fire door at the far end of the hallway. They hurried past Stela into the room, Brian in their wake.

He paused in the doorway.

"We couldn't wait," Dawna said to him as she zipped up her coat, raising the pull to her collarbone.

"My God, Dawna..." Brian's gaze was trained on the red-stained buffet table. "You couldn't stop her?"

"What, stop Stela from making the bust? Why would I do that?"

"Stop her from carving up the perps. You knew we needed the witnesses alive."

Dawna kicked the little Russian's ribs again. He grunted. "See, Brian, nobody's dead. One guy got a flesh wound, that's all."

The Romanian cops had fanned out across the room, applying flex-cuffs and a tourniquet. Stela turned her weapon over to a colleague and joined the other women.

Brian pushed at his sandy hair. "But the blood. I thought..."

"Not blood. Borscht. Take a deep breath, Brian, you'll smell the beets."

Relief flooded his face. "My mistake. You know what I thought, with her history and all. That she'd done it again."

Stela had gathered the other women into a circle. She spoke loudly enough for Dawna to hear the soothing cadence of explanation. Ten women going home in-

stead of to Brussels. Stela would need to talk for a while to make them see that that was a good outcome.

Dawna's gaze went back to Brian. "That she'd done *what* again?"

"Well, you knew about her arrests, right? When she was in the Wildlife Service?"

"Nobody told me about any arrests."

"You should have gotten a sheet on her." He made a face. "Warden Stela Dragomir set a record for the number of poachers captured in a season. She once took down a gang of twelve single-handed. Using only a shotgun and a knife. She's very good with a blade. That's why they picked her for this job." He frowned. "She didn't tell you?"

"Her English isn't that good," Dawna said. Not nearly so good as Brian's for example. "So what did you mean, she'd done it again?"

"There were some questions about excessive force. The guys she arrested came in bloodier than they should have. Like she'd seen them gutting a wild boar, maybe got a little crazy, used the knife more than she had to."

So that explained Brian's Byzantine behavior, why he'd manipulated Dawna the way he had. An experienced law enforcement officer, Stela didn't need Dawna to coach her through the op. But Brian had wanted Dawna there, keeping an eye on Stela. He'd pulled strings to get a female instructor

assigned, one who was almost guaranteed to involve herself in the operation. He'd kept Stela's background from Dawna, let her believe that Stela was a green recruit. Having withheld that information, he also had to withhold the rest of it—that Dawna was supposed to stop Stela from gutting the criminals Brian needed for witnesses.

"It might have been a good idea to let me know what was going on."

"Hey, I thought you did know."

"Get real. We do a sting, we fool the bad guys. Not each other."

Dawna turned on her heel, letting him know he'd messed up, she'd caught him at it, he'd pay a price. Stela would get credit for the bust, Dawna would get credit for training Stela, Brian would get zilch—Dawna would make sure of that. Later.

Stela saw her coming across the room, stood to greet her.

"Fine, fine job," Dawna said. "A pleasure working with you."

"My pleasure, too." Stela reached up and lowered the zipper on Dawna's coat. Her plump fingers patted the fabric. "Better that way. Not so stern."

Coaching Dawna now. Treating her as an equal. Which was right. Stela was as good as anyone Dawna had ever worked with. Almost as good as Dawna herself. She'd never forget her: Stela the Impaler.

"You ever decide to go into pro wrestling," Dawna said, "I've got just the name for you."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



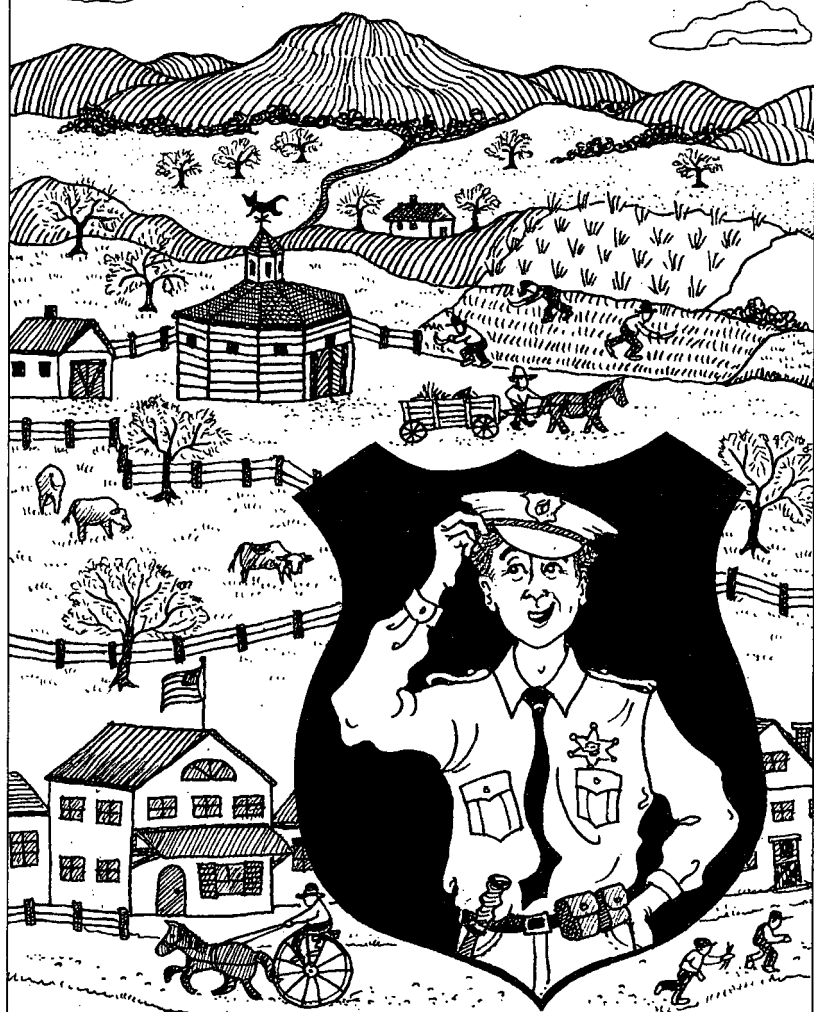
Hulton Archive

Seeing if the coats is clear. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 143.

FICTION

GRANDMA MOSES LIVES



Sherrard Gray

Corporal Jeff Hanley was bent over a bowl of chili in the Busy Bee when a heavysset man in a cashmere coat entered the restaurant and walked over.

"Officer Hanley? I believe we've met before. I'm Zephyr Delorme."

Jeff recognized the art critic, who divided his time between East Montpelier and Boston and wrote for the local *Times Argus* and the Boston *Globe*. They had met once at a gallery opening.

"Would it be possible to have a word with you?" asked Delorme. He slid an eye over Jeff's chili. "When you're finished, of course."

Jeff nodded, and Delorme ordered coffee and a slice of banana cream pie and took a booth by a window overlooking Rock River's Main Street. Minutes later Jeff slid into the opposite seat as Delorme was chasing his last bite of pie with a swallow of coffee.

"Cowboy coffee," said the art critic. "Strong enough to float a horse-shoe. I went to your station, but no one was there except your chief and you're the man I want to talk to. You have a background in art if I'm not mistaken."

"It was my favorite subject in high school and I take up a brush now and then, but that's it."

"Someone in this area is forging Grandma Moses paintings."

Jeff stared at him.

"In the past month several paintings have shown up in a gallery in New York City that I'm sure are fakes. One went for fifty grand, another for forty." Delorme signaled the waitress for more pie and

pulled out an eight-by-ten print from a pigskin briefcase that showed a maple grove with people on snowshoes collecting sap. A horsedrawn gathering sled stood in the middle of the grove, and in the background was a sugarhouse with steam rising from its cupola.

"See anything wrong with this scene?"

Jeff studied the painting for a minute. "Not really."

"The coffee's awful, but someone knows how to make banana cream pie here," said Delorme attacking his second piece. "What about those buckets on the trees?"

"Look okay to me."

"Have you ever sugared?"

"Look," said Jeff impatiently, "I've got plenty to do." He took a second look at the painting. "Too many buckets?"

"Had me worried, Jeff, since, if I'm not mistaken, you're an old Vermonter. Young Vermonter, I should say. What are you, thirty?"

"Thirty-two."

"I'm on the scary side of sixty. There is not a tree in that grove that's big enough for more than two buckets, but some have three or four. Grandma Moses would not have made a mistake like that." Delorme laid out a second photo depicting a village with men scything grain in the background. "Here's the reason I think the forger lives in this area. Look familiar?"

"Holy smoke," said Jeff. "That building looks like Harrington's Round Barn outside town, even has the same catamount weather vane. And Almanac Mountain behind it.

So maybe Grandma Moses passed through Rock River."

"She was never near Rock River. Spent most of her life in Hoosick Falls and Eagle Bridge in New York." Delorme shot a longing glance at the pie case on the counter. "I have two weaknesses: women and banana cream pie. I'm getting too old and fat for the women, and if I eat another piece of pie, you might have to perform CPR. As you probably know, there are three serious artists in this area: two in Rock River, one in North Mills." He handed Jeff a list. "It could be any one of these, but I'm betting on James Jarrett. Colleen Demming's wacky but in a harmless way, I think, and Kaolin May is too successful. The guy doesn't need this. Another thing about Jarrett. I understand his wife has been in trouble with the law, dealing drugs or something like that." The blue eyes in the fleshy face bore into Jeff. "You care about art, don't you? Then this crook must be caught. He, or she, is getting rich on the back of a great American artist."

"I'll see what I can do," said Jeff, who was both fascinated and horrified that someone was forging Grandma Moses. "We studied her in high school. I remember she didn't even start painting until she was in her seventies, and then kept at it until she was a hundred."

"None like her," agreed Delorme. "Perhaps you could interview these three painters—in a low-key way, of course. If they let you in their studios, one thing to look for is pressed board or Masonite lying around. Grandma Moses seldom used can-

vas, painted most of her works on wood. She also used linseed oil to prepare the wood."

Delorme picked up his cup, and then grimaced and set it aside. "What's with your chief anyway? When I walked into his office an hour ago, he was juggling rubber eggs."

"He was?" said Jeff, trying to bite back a smile.

Standing in the squad room outside Miles Watts' door, Jeff heard the soft sounds of juggling, then a curse and a flurry of bouncing rubber eggs on the chief's paper-strewn desk. He knocked.

"Yeah?" came a gruff voice. As Jeff stepped inside, Miles slammed shut a desk drawer and fumbled with his reading glasses. There was a faint ping in the corner as another drop of melting snow from the roof landed in a pail. "Zephyr find you?"

"He says someone from around here is imitating Grandma Moses and selling the paintings for forty grand and more."

"Come on. In Rock River?" The chief's face lit up as he took a deck of cards from the drawer. "Pick a card."

Jeff didn't know whether to laugh or cry—this hardboiled forty-five-year-old cop who dreamed of quitting police work and touring the state putting on shows for kids. Something touching about that. "Okay." He pulled out a card.

"Put it back. Don't let me see it."

Jeff shoved the card back into the deck. Miles shuffled the cards and turned partway around, all the

time talking, trying to maintain eye contact with his victim. "All right. Remember your card? Good." Chief threw the deck straight up. Fifty-two cards splattered against the waterstained ceiling and fluttered down. "What the hell?" Miles stared at the ceiling.

"What's wrong?"

"Your card was supposed to stick up there. So what makes Delorme think the forger's from around here?"

"One of the paintings has Harrington's Round Barn in it. He gave me the names of the three best-known painters in the area, wants us to check them out."

"Look," said Miles, "we've got a gang of thieves running loose in Gilman County, three break-ins here in the past month, and you're worried about Grandma Moses?"

"It's not right," said Jeff. "A great American painter who was still putting out good stuff in her nineties, and now some sleazebag is getting rich on her name."

With a sigh Miles dropped his eyes to the list. "All right. You'd better interview Colleen Demming, I'll take the two men."

"Why's that?"

"Because she's goodlooking. Might upset my wife. Besides, you're so straight I know nothing will happen."

Jeff felt his cheeks redden.

"Forrest finished with your cruiser yet?" Forrest Hanley, Jeff's brother, ran a Gulf station in town.

"Tomorrow afternoon. I'm still using our extra cruiser." Jeff thought of explaining why he'd backed into Marvin Hobbes' car, his

rear window covered with ice from that sleet last weekend, but held his tongue. Chief didn't like excuses. He should have been paying more attention. He also should have been more alert back in July when he arrested the wrong Bill Smith—there were four of them in Gilman County alone—for stealing a frozen turkey from the Grand Union. Maybe Miles was right; maybe police work wasn't his thing, and he should go back to painting houses.

Chief was watching water drip into the bucket. "This place is falling apart. Leaky roof, wind blowing in around the windows. You know what those cheapo selectmen have done? Cut back on our heating bill. We're like shivering rats in here. I'd better check out that latest break-in on Winnemere Road, so why don't you look up these painters yourself, have some fun, and we'll forget about it. You'll have to clear it with the North Mills PD to see this Kaolin May." Miles started picking up the cards, then looked hard at his corporal. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Maybe."

"Get a haircut before your ears completely disappear."

Colleen Demming lived in a small ranch house on Cherry Street with a two-car garage almost as big as the house. The lawn was still hidden under a foot of snow, but a bright sun had melted the snow off the front walk and driveway. Jeff knew Ms. Demming slightly. Sooner or later, except for the complete shut-ins, you ran into everyone in

Rock River, a dairy and logging town of seventeen hundred people. He'd been born and reared on a Rock River dairy farm. After high school he had moved to the big city forty miles away, Ravensburg, and tried his hand at being a plumber's helper, a cattle trucker, and a housepainter. But the big city—Ravenburg had eleven thousand souls—and the paint fumes got to him, and when an opening on the Rock River force opened up eighteen months ago, he'd applied and was sent to the police academy in Pittsford. On graduation he'd moved in with his mother, who'd taken a house in town after his father was killed in a tractor accident.

Jeff often took his mother to the Friday night bingo game in the Town Hall, and once they had sat next to Ms. Demming and a girl of about ten. He remembered the painter as friendly but a little distracted. Sometimes, like himself, she seemed to drift off into a world of her own and then, with a little headshake, would snap back to the present.

Opening the door to him now, she put a hand to her mouth and backed up a step.

"Remember me?" said Jeff.

"Yes." She looked a little older than when he'd last seen her, another line or two around the eyes, but her curls were still bright yellow in the November sun.

"We met at bingo one night. I'm Corporal Jeff Hanley of the Rock River Police Department."

"That's right. I was there with my niece Crystal, and you were with . . . an older woman."

"My mother," said Jeff quickly. "I need some information from you, Ms. Demming. We have reason to believe that someone in the area is impersonating Grandma Moses."

"Impersonating?" Her eyes fixed on his with a faintly amused glint. "You think I look like her?"

Jeff liked lively women, but he wasn't good at flirting. For one thing, he didn't know how to. But those golden curls and that direct look made him wish he were more adept.

"Not at all, ma'am."

"Would you like to come in?"

She led him through a foyer cluttered with bric-a-brac into a small living room with a green armchair strewn with comic books and fantasy magazines and a sofa half covered with rumpled clothes. A shaggy black cat slid off the sofa like spilled molasses and flowed onto a windowsill. Ms. Demming gathered up the magazines from the armchair and piled them on the floor.

"Sorry about the mess," she said. "My cleaning lady has had the flu but hopes to be back tomorrow. Crystal stayed with me last week and she's—well, you know kids." A broad grin freshened the tired face, a sudden warmth. "Crystal's a great kid but almost as disorganized as me."

As Jeff sank into the armchair, his eye fell on a clay sculpture beside a hallway on the far side of the room. Mounted on a wooden pedestal was what looked like a spaceship with portholes, an observation deck, a coat-hanger antenna. On the floor around the pedestal lay clumps of Silly Putty.

She noticed his gaze. "I was showing Crystal how to sculpt. Probably should have had her do it in my studio—" she gestured toward the hallway "—but I prefer working alone." A dreamy expression came over her as she looked at the sculpture. "Crystal and I invented this other world called Ca-boodle. That was her name for it. A place where everyone's happy, where bad things don't happen. I know it's silly but—" She looked sadly at him, and then out the window at the blue sky. "We need our dreams . . ." She placed her hands on her knees, returning to the present. "How long have you been a policeman, Corporal Hanley?"

"A little over a year. Before that I was a housepainter in Ravensburg." He couldn't believe how relaxed he felt with this woman; he was tempted to tell her his life story. "I've . . . had some problems on the force. You probably heard how I backed into the head selectman's car?"

Colleen Demming waved a dismissive hand. "I did the same thing myself a couple of weeks ago. Bumped into a woman in the Grand Union parking lot. Happens all the time."

"Or the time I arrested the wrong Bill Smith?"

She burst out laughing.

"I thought that was so cool. I mean, life can get boring without funny little incidents like that." She leaned forward on the couch, her expression suddenly serious. "The other day I saw you talking to some high school kids on the sidewalk. Really talking to them. They like

you, Corporal Hanley, and that's what's important." She flashed a bright smile. "I've been a terrible hostess. Would you care for something to drink?"

"No, thanks," he said quickly, and then just as quickly changed his mind. "Sure."

"Coffee? Tea?" Colleen shook her head. "No, a policeman wouldn't drink tea. Probably black coffee."

"Matter of fact, my favorite drink is hot chocolate."

"It is? Two hot chocolates then." She jumped up and went into the kitchen.

While waiting for her to return, Jeff, shifting in his seat, heard a rustle underneath and fished out a packet of cigarette-rolling papers wedged between cushion and chair. Oh-oh, he thought, putting the packet on the floor, was Ms. Demming a pothead? There was a thump by the windowsill, and the cat padded over and sniffed his shoes.

"Hi there," he said bending down. "What's your name?"

"Midnight." Colleen had returned. "Careful," she said, setting his hot chocolate on an end table. "She sheds like crazy."

Midnight jumped onto his lap, purring. It was so peaceful. He wanted to take off his holster and stretch out his legs, but he was there for a reason.

When he told her about the paintings Delorme had mentioned, she stared at him so long without speaking that he wondered if she were in some kind of trance. "Do you have any idea who might be painting these fakes?" he asked.

"I don't know." She stared at the cat in his lap. "Midnight likes you."

Putting down his mug, he said, "I do a little painting myself from time to time, and I'd be interested in what you're working on. Any chance of seeing your studio?"

"I'd love to show it to you," she said, "but I'm afraid it's even a worse mess than this room. Another time." She pushed back her curls. "I'm not just saying that either."

Was this delightful person selling fakes of Grandma Moses? He couldn't believe that as he sipped his hot chocolate and ran a hand over Midnight's back. He wanted to stay in this chair and chat with her about painting, about life in Rock River, but he had a job to do. With a sigh, he picked Midnight up and set her on the floor.

He found the second painter, James Jarrett, splitting wood outside a lean-to that looked like it was held up by hope alone. Next to the lean-to stood a small, equally dilapidated barn. Three goats milled around in a pen attached to the barn, while chickens clucked inside. On the other side of the dirt drive stood an old two story farmhouse. He had met Jarrett at an opening of the painter's work in Ravensburg two or three years ago, and they had spoken briefly.

Jarrett, a handsome, leathery man with a three-day stubble, wearing jeans and a windbreaker patched with duct tape, set down his splitting maul as Jeff walked over. "It's the art-loving police officer. Don't tell me you want to buy one of my paintings?"

"I'm making inquiries about Grandma Moses."

Jarrett pursed his lips as if in deep thought. "Sorry, nobody by that name lives here."

"Probably a good thing," said Jeff, "since she's been dead for forty years. We have reason to believe someone in the area is selling imitations of her work."

"Damn!" Jarrett kicked at a piece of stove wood. "You finally caught me. Oh well, it was a hoot while it lasted." The front door of the house opened, and both men turned. A woman stood on the porch. Jeff had seen her working at the deli in the Kwik Stop. "Oh-oh," whispered Jarrett. "Narelle doesn't look thrilled."

The woman, in chinos and a purple sweater, a white bandage slanting across her forehead like warpaint, started across the yard. Without greeting Jeff she demanded, "What's this about?"

"Officer Hanley thinks someone from around here is selling Grandma Moses fakes."

The woman laughed harshly. Under the bandage was a discolored lump as if she had walked into a door or taken a bad spill on an icy walk. "Who the hell would want to imitate *her*? Haven't you got anything better to do, Hanley? A pack of thieves running around loose stealing everything in sight and you're worried about Grandma Moses? Well, I've got to go to *work*." She started to turn, then stopped. "If you ever do catch those thieves, try to arrest the right person this time." She stomped back through the snow into the house.

"Sorry about that," said Jarrett,

rolling a cigarette. "She's been upset ever since she got banged up playing hockey last night. She's on this ladies' team that plays every Monday night in Ravensburg."

With his thumbnail he snapped a kitchen match into flame. "Someone faking Grandma Moses? That would have been right up my alley, since neither of us can draw. You've seen her human figures? They look like an eight-year-old drew them. But her colors were good, and her subject matter wholesome. People like that in this uncertain world."

Jarrett puffed on his hand-rolled. "Grandma Moses and I have something else in common: frugality. There's a wonderful story about her and the art critic Louis Caldor, who discovered her. After seeing some of her works in a Hoosick Falls drugstore, he scooted over to her house to buy everything on hand, but she wasn't home. A daughter-in-law told him there were ten paintings lying around, and he agreed to buy them and left. When Moses got home, she discovered she only had nine. So she cut the biggest one in half. And Caldor didn't discover this until months later."

Jeff was laughing. "I hadn't heard that one before."

"The most interesting thing about that story is that she wasn't being sneaky, she was just being a frugal Yankee, making do with what she had. Believe me," he added, "I know every painter within fifty miles, and none is forging Grandma Moses."

"A painting called *The Village* sold in New York recently for forty thousand or more. It has Harrington's Round Barn in it."

Jarrett laughed.

"Moses was never in Rock River."

"That's wonderful," said Jarrett. "Who put you up to this wild goose chase?"

"Zephyr Delorme, the art critic."

"The windbag, you mean. That idiot wouldn't recognize a work of art if it hit him in his fat ass. But don't let me dissuade you from this pointless quest. Would you like to see my studio? See if I've been painting fakes?"

"Sure. I'd like to see what you're doing." Jeff was ninety-nine percent certain Jarrett wasn't the culprit, but it would be interesting to see his studio.

Jeff could still remember his high school art teacher, Mrs. Sullivan, saying, "You have a nice sense of composition. Stick with it." She'd given him confidence, but in the harsh world outside of school, much of that self-esteem had drained away, not helped by Chief Watts' telling him the other day that he had two left feet, or people like Jarrett's wife rubbing in his mistakes.

Jarrett's work had become even stranger than in his show several years ago. Faces peering from ruined buildings, trees growing out of statues, the moon shattered into a dozen pieces. At first Jeff was put off by the contorted shapes and raw colors, but after a minute or two the paintings took on a strange power. Leaning against the wall was a canvas of a Gothic house with a black moon behind it and twisted trees in front. As he looked, it took on an abstract, almost playful, quality. Clearly none of these paintings remotely resembled

Grandma Moses' work. He nodded his head in appreciation.

Jarrett, arms folded over his chest, smiled.

"Do you know Kaolin May?" asked Jeff.

"Afraid so."

"I thought I'd question him, too."

"Good luck," said Jarrett, flicking ashes into a coffee can on a table strewn with paints.

A voice barked from the doorway. Narelle stood there in a leather jacket, a fresh bandage on her forehead. "Tell him what happened between you and Kaolin. He's not going to arrest you for something that stupid. I'm out of here." She wheeled and was gone.

Jarrett puffed on his cigarette and said quietly, "You married, Hanley?"

"No."

"Take my advice and don't." A frown crossed the stubbled face like a blown leaf and then was gone. "Kaolin's a big cheese, right? Slick dresser, beautifully groomed. He had a show in Montpelier at the Wood Gallery a year ago, and for a lark, when no one was looking, I hung one of his paintings upside-down. I guess he wasn't amused because he spray-painted 'Made in the U.S. by American Labor' across a painting of mine in the local library. Nice guy, huh?"

Dusk was settling in, the snow on the ground turning a delicate mauve. A flock of southbound Canada geese honked overhead as Jeff went up the front walk to Kaolin May's Federal-style mansion in North Mills. He had checked in

with the North Mills Police Department, gotten a skeptical chuckle and a "help yourself" from the chief.

A teenage boy opened the door and stared at the intruder with slack-mouthed hostility.

"Is Kaolin May at home?"

"No."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Uh-uh."

"Who is it, Travis?" A woman in a black dress holding a pair of scissors came up behind the boy.

"Wants to see the old man," mumbled Travis.

"For what, may I ask?"

When Jeff told her about Grandma Moses, the woman smiled thinly. "I can assure you that if my husband were going to fake another's work, he wouldn't pick her. He's not into American Primitive. He's in his studio out back."

Jeff looked at the boy, who grinned. "You said home. That ain't his house, it's his studio."

As Jeff walked along a shoveled path toward the studio, the sound of geese was drowned out by the blaring of snow machines in the woods behind the studio, causing him to smile. He wondered if it could be Judge Harris, a.k.a. Hotrod Harris because of his love of skiddos, who lived in North Mills not far from here. Just the other day he was sure Hotrod had speeded up a pretrial hearing in order to get in a skiddoo ride before dark.

May's studio was a cedar-shingled cabin at least as big as the house Jeff shared with his mother, with picture windows on two sides. He rapped on the door.

"What?" yelled a gravelly voice.

"Corporal Hanley of the Rock River Police Department."

The door was flung open, and a man with a ruddy face and well-trimmed beard faced him. He looked a little like Burl Ives minus the folksinger's twinkle. "I've got news for you, this isn't Rock River. You want to buy a painting?"

Jeff told him about Moses. "Do you have any idea who might be doing this?"

"I'm interested in *art*, not cartoons. The last time I saw a Grandma Moses I almost got a hernia laughing." Jeff could smell whisky on his breath and spotted a bourbon bottle on a worktable behind him. "I haven't the faintest idea who would be desperate enough to forge Grandma Moses, and if I did, do you think I'd tell you? And, yes, that's a bottle of booze behind me you're pretending not to look at."

"What you drink is none of my business—unless you're driving," said Jeff, who had taken a strong dislike to the man.

"Damn straight it isn't. Now I'm busy, sir. Good day." He closed the door in the officer's face. As Jeff walked back to his squad car, he glimpsed the boy's smirking face in a hall window.

The next morning, while on duty, Jeff took his boss's advice and drove over to Red's Barber Shop, a block from the Busy Bee. Red's boasted an increasingly rare barber pole, old barber's chairs, a silver-plated cash register, and two barbers, one of whom, the owner Red Phelps, wore a rust-colored handlebar mus-

tache and affected old-style swearing, like "gol-durn" and "by cracky," to go with the decor. Jeff found the place a little too cute for his taste, but it was the only barber shop in town, and driving forty miles to Ravensburg was proving uneconomical. He was not a great fan of Red himself, with his waxed mustache and pithy sayings, but the man was a good barber. In fact, he was doing so well, Jeff had heard, that he had recently moved from a ranch house on West Hill to a three story mansion on Barberry Lane.

A sign above a row of hair tonics and powders read WHEN LIFE HANDS YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE, and hanging on the walls were five or six oil paintings, several by local artists. There was only one other customer in the shop, a well-dressed man Jeff didn't recognize, probably from neighboring North Mills or Coatsville, getting a trim from old Homer McCafferty. Red was stretched out in one of the three barber chairs reading the *Burlington Free Press*.

"I've got the time if you've got the money," quipped Red, putting down his paper and standing.

"It's been over three months," said Jeff, settling into the chair Red had just vacated. "Chief says I'm starting to look like a St. Bernard."

Red was not a chatty barber, and as the scissors went snip and hair fell on the sheet around Jeff's shoulders with a light patter, he found himself thinking about Colleen Demming. It had been a while since a woman had interested him that much, but she was clearly too exotic for dull him. Still, it was fun

thinking about her, picturing the swift changes in her expression from laughter to sadness.

He had the eerie sense that something was oppressing her. Well, whatever it was most certainly had nothing to do with Grandma Moses. A sudden sneeze two feet away jarred him from his daydream.

"This dang-blad cold," said Red.

"Bummer," said Jeff, and then sat up. "Didn't you say last time I was here that some of those paintings are by local artists?"

"A-yup. That one with the space-ships in the shape of fruits is Colleen Demming's. The covered bridge is by Kaolin May. Let's see—that one of Almanac Mountain is also by May."

"Nothing by James Jarrett?"

"No, sir." There was a pause, and Red said, "That's right, you're interested in art, aren't you?"

"I just wish I had some talent myself." There was no response from Red, and Jeff lapsed back into his reverie about Colleen, but again it was short-lived. The radio on his belt crackled, and Chief's voice said, "Unit 1 to Unit 3."

Something in Miles's voice made him stiffen; it didn't sound like a routine call. "Go ahead, Unit 1."

"We have a report of a 10-56 at 1213 Cherry."

Jeff, already out of his chair, blurted, "On my way" into his transmitter. Code 10-56 was suicide. As he snatched his coat off the antlered rack, it hit him where 1213 Cherry was: Colleen Demming's. He dived out of the barber shop and into his squad car.

He remembered nothing about the drive to Ms. Demming's except a numbness in his heart, a desperate hope that this was a bad dream he would wake up from. The garage doors were up and Miles inside when he slewed to a stop. There was one car in the garage, a blue Plymouth Acclaim, its passenger door open, all four windows down. A flexible hose, like the kind fire departments use for drafting water, ran from the tailpipe to the passenger-side window.

Chief inclined his head toward the front seat, and Jeff forced himself to look, saw a figure in pajamas, blonde curly head slumped over the wheel. It was Colleen Demming all right, a bluish tinge to her skin. She wore faded pink pajamas with a pattern of blue ducks. The back of her pajama top was pulled up, and one arm hung limply by her side, fingertips grazing the floormat. The glove compartment was open, the floor under it strewn with maps, a first-aid kit, loose change, a pack of tissues, a ballpoint pen.

"The cleaning lady, Bea Tubman, found her half an hour ago," said Miles, leading him to the back of the car where the hose was attached to the exhaust pipe with duct tape. "First thing she did was open the passenger door and open all four windows, but it was too late."

A third cruiser pulled into the driveway: Sergeant Wendy Vance of the Rock River PD. Looking into the Acclaim, Wendy let out an uncharacteristic curse. "What a waste," she said almost savagely.

"All that stuff on the floor of the

car?" said Miles, trying to pull everyone, including himself, into an investigative mode. "Looks to me like at the last minute she wanted to write a note." He turned to Wendy. "Why don't you and Jeff go inside, talk to Bea. She's pretty shook."

As the two started for the door, the new assistant medical examiner, Joan Libby, arrived and without a word leaned into the Acclaim's front seat; a minute later, looking a little peaked, she stepped back from the car. "This is only my third case, guess I need to toughen up a little. She has fairly advanced rigor mortis and fixed lividity, which means when I press her skin it doesn't blanch. I'd guess the time of death at eight to ten hours ago."

"It's pretty messy in the house," Miles told Jeff and Wendy, "but tell Bea not to clean up until we've finished our investigation."

They found Bea sitting dazedly on the couch in the living room. She looked up with tearstained cheeks. "I loved that little girl," she sniffled. "That's what I called her, 'my little girl,' because she was like a child in so many ways. A lost child."

There were tears in Wendy's eyes, too, as she gave the cleaning woman a hug.

"When I came this morning to clean up," said Bea, "Colleen wasn't anywhere around. I thought that odd because her car was here. I went into the garage and saw that hose. All the windows were closed except the front passenger window, which was holding the hose. She'd stuffed the crack with rags. I

thought there might still be a chance, so I jerked open the door, hit the button that opens all four windows, and aired out the car, but she was already..." Bea clenched a plump fist. "I was afraid this was going to happen. Colleen hasn't been herself lately. Something's been bothering her."

"Do you have any idea what?" asked Wendy.

"Only a hunch," said Bea. "She worked so hard at her painting, but people just weren't buying her stuff. As far as I know, she sold only one painting last year, to Red's Barber Shop." Jeff recalled the whimsical painting of spaceships shaped like bananas and pineapples buzzing around. "This house was paid for by a small inheritance from her father, and that bothered her. She wanted so much to make it on her own. Colleen," said Bea, staring at the floor. "Baby, why?" She lifted her head. "What am I going to tell her brother in Montpelier? Her niece? Crystal will be devastated."

Midnight crept out from under the green armchair and trotted from the room, producing another gale of sobs from Bea.

Late that afternoon Miles dropped Jeff off at his brother's garage to pick up his squad car. Forrest Hanley had a pickup on a lift, and the high schooler who pumped gas for him was working on a Trans Am in the next bay.

Forrest looked up with a brake tool in his hand. "I heard about Colleen Demming."

"Yeah."

"She was one of our customers.

Different but fun." He lowered his voice and nodded toward the next bay. "Boomer did a lot of work on her car. She'd bring him cookies, even gave him a pair of gloves on his birthday." He squinted at his brother. "Jeff, you okay? You didn't know her, did you?"

"I'd talked to her recently about art. And life on other worlds." He was trying to recall the name she and her niece had for their idyllic planet. Caboodle, that was it.

The two were quiet a moment, and then Forrest said, "What happened to your hair? You trying to cut it yourself?"

"I was getting a cut at Red's when the call on Colleen came in."

From the next bay came loud hammering, the clang of a wrench bouncing on cement, a muffled curse. Lowering his voice, Forrest said, "Boomer's taking it pretty hard. She gassed herself?"

"Taped a hose to the Acclaim's tailpipe and ran it into the front seat."

"I don't get it. A young, healthy woman and she pulls the plug on herself?"

"I can't talk about it now. We haven't finished our investigation."

The two fell silent again while more thumps and curses came from Boomer. "The kid's never this noisy," said Forrest. "Who found her?"

"The cleaning lady, about ten this morning. I have to hand it to Bea. She had the presence of mind to open all the car's windows. She even tried mouth-to-mouth, but it was too late. Colleen had been dead for hours."

Forrest lowered the tool he'd been using to adjust the wheel cylinder. "How'd she open the windows?"

Jeff shrugged. "Hit that button on the driver's door that controls all four windows."

He stared at his brother. "What's wrong?"

"Are you *sure* she killed herself?"

"What're you talking about?"

"If she took her own life, the electric windows wouldn't work."

It was quiet in the next bay, and Forrest motioned Jeff into his office adjoining the work area. Forrest sat down behind a counter littered with manuals and car magazines while Jeff took a stool on the customer side of the counter.

"Was there any gas left in the car?"

"We didn't check."

"I'll bet there is. You want to commit suicide in a car? You rig up the hose, right, then start the car and wait for the carbon monoxide to do its job. But after you're dead, the car keeps running until the tank is empty and then, with the key still on, the battery finally goes dead. Especially with a weak battery like the Acclaim had. That car was hurting. Ask Boomer, he did most of the work on it. No battery, no electric windows. I'm no genius, but it looks to me like someone killed her somewhere else and put her in the car."

"My God," breathed Jeff, suddenly feeling nauseated. Blindly he went outside and around to the back wall of the garage, bent over a drift of dirty snow. A minute later, he went back.

Forrest touched the sleeve of his

blue jacket. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"Hey, Boomer," cried Forrest, "c'mere a sec."

A fifteen- or sixteen-year-old kid wearing a greasy cap with the legend BITE MY ASS across the crown shuffled to the doorway.

"Colleen Demming. The lady who died this morning?"

Jeff was surprised by the boy's reaction. He looked pretty rough with his aggressive cap and a broken front tooth, yet at the mention of Colleen his features tightened as if he were trying not to cry.

"She was found in her Acclaim," said Jeff. "We don't know how long she'd been there but probably at least eight hours. If the key were left on, would there still be juice in the battery?"

"No way," said the boy. "Ms. Demming needed a new battery. She hated to spend money on that car, said she was going to get a new one so why throw money away?"

"So if the key were left on for eight hours, the battery would be dead?"

"More like four hours." Boomer pulled himself together and put on a tough-guy sneer. "What difference does it make? I mean she's . . ." Tears sprang to the boy's eyes and Forrest went to him, draped an arm over his shoulders.

"One last question. Did Ms. Demming leave the key in the ignition when she brought her car in?"

"No. The first time she left her car here I almost couldn't find the key. It was in that little compartment by the gearshift."

"Thanks," said Jeff. "You've been

a big help." So that was why the glove compartment was open and all that stuff on the floor, he thought as the kid went back to his Trans Am. The perp frantically looking for the key to start the car. To Forrest he said, "Guess I'd better pick up my cruiser." The two went to the parking lot behind the garage.

"Miles give you any grief over this?" said Forrest, handing over the keys.

"I think he wants to get rid of me."

"Over a little thing like a fender bender?"

"There've been a few other little things. Arresting the wrong Bill Smith the other day didn't help. People in town are talking about going from a five man force back to a four man force, letting the staties pick up more of the slack."

"Do you like police work?"

Jeff grinned. "I know I'm green and make a lot of mistakes, but I like solving problems and I like working with kids, trying to nudge them away from drugs, fighting, vandalism. Yeah, I like it."

Forrest punched him lightly on the chest. "Someday you're going to make one helluva cop. Okay?"

"Okay." Feeling better than he had all day, Jeff slid behind the wheel of his Crown Victoria. "Hey, Forrest?" he said rolling down the window.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just glad you're my brother."

Forrest laughed and slapped the top of the squad car. A chunk of snow slid down the windshield and onto the hood.

Chief listened behind his desk with a skeptical frown as Jeff talked. "Maybe," he said finally.

There was a tap on the door, and Sergeant Vance walked in. "My turn to get the coffee and doughnuts, isn't it?" She smiled at Jeff and ran a hand through her short black hair. "And hot chocolate with a marshmallow."

When she was out the door, Miles said casually, "There goes a good woman."

"What?"

Jeff wasn't sure he had heard right. Miles waxing sentimental? Sort of like an NFL coach singing a lullaby to his team before the big game.

"What do you mean 'what?'," said Miles crossly. "I'm talking about Wendy. She'd make someone a helluva wife. She's had a hard life, her father splitting when she was a kid and all that, but you wouldn't know it. She doesn't walk around looking for sympathy."

Jeff had never heard the chief talk that way about anyone except maybe his two nephews. Was he sweet on her? He didn't think so. Far as he knew, Miles was happily married.

"It's after five now," said Miles, his face lighting up. "Going over to my sister's tonight."

"You can practice some magic tricks on your nephews."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Miles put on a blank face, and Jeff had to pinch himself to keep from laughing. "All right," said Miles, tamping some papers together, "I'll give Hotrod a call, get a

warrant to search Demming's house tomorrow."

A brisk breeze was swirling snow off the banks when they pulled into Colleen's driveway the next day. The chief and Jeff first went into the garage and checked the Acclaim's gas tank, which was more than half full.

"Your brother's right," said Miles. "She must have died somewhere else and been placed in the car." He looked through the open garage doors at the macadam drive blanketed by windblown snow. "Yesterday the driveway was bare and so was the front walk, thanks to the sun, so we aren't going to find any tracks."

"How about the rear?" said Jeff. "There's a back lawn covered with snow. The perp might have come that way. Might even have used a skiddoo."

They went around back. About twenty feet from the house, Jeff saw something in the snow and tramped over to it. He bent over a twisted, wiggly print that started out of nowhere, as if made by a bird, and continued down a slope toward a tree-lined brook. But the print had not been made by any bird he had ever seen.

While Miles looked inside a trash barrel, Jeff crouched over the odd squiggles and that word popped into his head again: Caboodle. The niece's name for their imaginary planet. He felt an eerie excitement, then told himself, come on, you've watched too much *Star Trek*.

"What've you got?" called Miles. "Something really weird here."

Jeff straightened. "I know you're going to laugh at this, but this track wasn't made by a human being or any animal I've ever seen."

Muttering, Miles walked over, and the two followed the track toward the half-frozen brook. At the bottom of the incline, Miles swore softly. A paper bag had blown up against one of the alders. "There's your alien," Miles said. "From Mars, maybe?" He looked at the red lettering on the bag. "Or possibly the Grand Union?"

Jeff stared unseeing at the bag. "I blew it," he said with a bitterness that surprised even himself. "Like I blow everything. Backing into Hobbes' car, arresting the wrong person, walking around with half a haircut." He crumpled the bag in his hands. "You're right. I'm in the wrong line of work."

"Let's go inside," said Miles.

The two trudged back up the hill.

They found the living room as Jeff had seen it two days ago: untidy but with no sign of a struggle. A wall calendar with events weeks ahead penciled in did not suggest someone planning suicide. They went into Colleen's bedroom.

"Notice something odd about this room?" said Miles.

Jeff looked around but came up blank.

"Look at the night table. Everything in order: Kleenex, this Isaac Asimov paperback, pad, pencil, handcream. The bedcovers all neatly smoothed out. Ms. Demming was a messy young lady. She damn sure wouldn't straighten everything up minutes before killing herself. And we've told Bea not to clean up.

Looks like we've got an anally compulsive killer."

Jeff chuckled morosely. "That narrows it down to maybe twenty million people. Let's hit the kitchen."

Minutes later Miles was staring at a space between the refrigerator and the stove. "Colleen was a sloppy housekeeper, but a cookbook on the floor? And that can of oven cleaner?"

"The fridge is at an angle," said Jeff, "as if someone bumped into it and knocked all that stuff off."

Miles swore under his breath. "We should have come in here yesterday."

"Yesterday we thought it was suicide."

"True. Looks to me like a struggle took place here. So the perp sneaks in at night, finds her in bed, and tries to suffocate her? She breaks free and comes in here, they fight, and he subdues her and carries her out to the car to make it look like suicide? This is getting really complicated. He comes back in, straightens up the bedroom but leaves the kitchen alone? Why? A mistake? Was he scared off by something like a passing vehicle?" Miles's eyes were bright as he shook his fist. "We're getting close, but . . . what've you got there?"

Jeff was bending over a clock-sized timer perched on the oven. "Looks like some dried blood on it, like someone got clobbered with this." Picking up the timer by one corner, he put it in an evidence bag.

They had started to leave the room when both men stopped in their tracks. A large man filled the

doorway. No one said anything for a minute, and then Chief said, "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Zephyr Delorme pulled a photograph from his case and held it up. It showed a painting of a village scene.

"My God," said Miles, "that's the Busy Bee. Same fake green-brick siding. The sign even says BUSY BEE. Where'd you get that?"

"The gallery in Manhattan e-mailed it to me this morning. This story has leaked out, and a suspicious customer who bought this painting for forty-eight grand a month ago took it back to the gallery. That's not all. See anyone who looks familiar?"

"Not really," said Miles, but Jeff snapped his fingers.

"That woman on the sidewalk with the blonde curls! Could that be Colleen Demming?"

Zephyr nodded.

"This is getting too deep for me," said Miles.

"Let's check out her studio," suggested the art critic. "That might prove enlightening."

"Look," said Miles, "an attractive young woman is murdered in a small Vermont town on a bleak November night. I'll bet a week's pay this has nothing to do with Grandma Moses. It's a boyfriend thing. But we'll look. The Rock River PD leaves no stone unturned."

Colleen's studio was on the north side of the house and contained only one window, its shade drawn. Miles raised it, revealing a worktable strewn with tubes of paint, a sprung armchair with a smock thrown over the back, stacks of can-

vases against a wall. In one corner a pile of photographs, in another a clutter of empty Coke cans.

"Bea said she never comes in here," said Miles, "and it looks it."

Zephyr, pawing through a stack of canvases, only grunted.

"Hey," said Jeff smiling as he looked at the work in progress on an easel by the table. It showed a sailboat skippered by a frog in a sailor's cap skimming over a bank of clouds, heading toward a distant, purple-hued planet. He turned toward the art critic. "She had a fertile imagination. I'm surprised she didn't sell more of her work."

With a small triumphant smile Zephyr held up a rectangle of pressed board. "She did."

The painting depicted a mill with a water wheel, two men fishing above the mill, and, in the background, figures pitching hay onto a horsedrawn wagon. The human figures were awkward, as if drawn by a child, and the perspective looked flat, but the colors were lively and the painting had a raw vitality. Zephyr pointed to the name written in black, childlike letters in the bottom right corner: Moses. "It has a period after the name, too, which is how the real Grandma Moses signed her works. And it's on Masonite, which, being a good Yankee, Moses preferred to canvas because it lasts longer." He held up another painting of skaters on a pond.

"I'll be damned," said Miles. "Good thing I only bet a week's pay."

"You know what Ms. Demming's problem was?" said Zephyr. "She wasn't steely enough to be a good crook. She was uncomfortable mak-

ing all this money with these fakes and became increasingly reckless. Probably wanted to get caught."

They found one more "Moses" canvas, this one of a quilting bee, and went back through the living room, Jeff lagging behind, thinking of a wasted talent and a too-brief life. Stepping into the living room from the hallway where the niece's clay sculpture stood, his eye strayed to the gobs of Silly Putty on the floor. Someone had stepped on one of them, leaving a circular tread with a dot in the center. He didn't recall seeing that print before and started to call back the chief, then thought better of it. He had already made a fool of himself over the paper bag tracks. Besides, it was probably from one of Colleen's shoes, or maybe even one of theirs.

They paused at the door, and Jeff's eyes swept the room, passing over the green armchair, backing up. Something about that chair . . . then he remembered the cigarette papers he'd found wedged beside the cushion. James Jarrett had rolled a cigarette while being interviewed.

"Jarrett," he murmured.

"What's that?" Chief stopped with his hand on the door.

"He smokes hand-rolleds, and I found a packet of Top papers under that cushion. He was more than just mildly upset over her death, too—he was sad, really sad. I'll bet anything he had something going with Colleen. But I can't believe he'd kill her."

"Why?"

"He seemed like too gentle a guy. And he was funny."

"Oh man." Miles looked ready to cry. "I've heard it all now."

Eight days later Jeff almost gagged on the hot chocolate he had gotten from the Busy Bee, along with coffee for Wendy and the chief. He and Wendy were alone in the squad room. Miles was in his office, and the other two full-time officers didn't come on duty until evening. An autopsy had established that Colleen had died of suffocation, possibly from a pillow, and not from carbon monoxide poisoning, but no new evidence had turned up. They were still waiting to hear from the lab on the bloodstained timer found in her kitchen.

It had been just another November week in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom: accidents on slippery roads; two chain saws and a logging chain stolen from a skidder; the Coke machine at Kellogg Union broken into and forty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents taken; a Massachusetts man arrested for mistaking a Jersey cow for a white-tailed buck; a high school chemistry teacher arrested for growing forty pot plants in his basement.

Wendy was sitting on the corner of Jeff's desk, and they'd been talking about painting, the weather, deer season. She was so easy to be with, so unjudgmental, that he found himself talking a blue streak.

But now they were laughing. They'd been listening to Miles juggling in the next room, the occasional missed rubber egg hitting the floor, a pleased "Hey!" as he must have pulled off an especially difficult maneuver. Then the chief's

phone had rung and all the eggs had started bouncing around, and an uncharacteristic word was overheard. As Jeff laughed, he took in the impish look of enjoyment on Wendy's face and marveled at how pleasant she was to be around. He thought of Colleen, also easy to be around, but there had been a dark, troubled side to her. Colleen was like a colorful but doomed meteor from outer space; Wendy, a steady, familiar planet.

A minute later the door opened and Miles stood scowling at them while the giggles died on their lips.

"The lab just called."

Jeff leaned forward, and Wendy slid off his desk.

"That bloodstain you found on the timer in Demming's kitchen? It wasn't hers. It was Narelle Jarrett's."

"How do they know?" asked Wendy.

"Mrs. Jarrett has a prior for dealing coke, so her prints and blood type are in the state's database." Miles tossed up a single rubber ball and caught it. "We're almost there, folks."

The three were silent for a moment. The rumble of a milk or pulp truck could be heard on Depot Street.

"It's not proof," said Miles. "We'll need a DNA analysis for that, which takes weeks, but Charlie says the match from just antigens and enzymes is accurate nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a thousand. Enough to get a warrant." A slow grin broke across his lined face. "Who knows, maybe the selectmen'll give us a new roof and

we can get rid of that bucket." He was looking at Wendy. "You okay?"

Sergeant Vance was white-faced. "Narelle killed that young woman in cold blood? Some things you never get used to in this business."

It was snowing again, the wind making powdery swirls across the fields, as Miles and Jeff went to the Jarretts' house. They found James Jarrett repairing the fence to the goat pen. The painter seemed distracted, no longer the upbeat joker Jeff had interviewed three days before. He looked up blankly, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, as the squad car pulled in.

"Looks out of it, doesn't he?" said Miles. "If Jarrett was spending time with Demming, not all of it discussing art, it could be Narelle's motive."

The two climbed out and walked over. "Can we speak to Mrs. Jarrett?" asked Miles.

The painter tapped the head of a framing hammer against his thigh. "What for?"

Miles said nothing, waited while Jarrett ground out his cigarette in the snow.

"She's not here. Staying with a sister in Albany."

"Mr. Jarrett, we're investigating Colleen Demming's death. We have reason to believe she was murdered."

Jarrett's lips formed the word "what," but no sound came out. The hammer slid from his hand into the snow.

"You were seeing her, weren't you?"

"No." Jarrett scooped up the

hammer and sagged against a post. Behind him a goat stuck an inquisitive head through the open window of its little barn. "Colleen," he murmured. Suddenly he raised his hand holding the hammer. Both cops reached instinctively for their clubs as Jarrett threw the hammer at the shed. Frightened bleats came from inside.

"I loved her," he said. "She was a troubled but sweet, sweet lady." Bleakly he looked at Jeff. "Yes, I was seeing her, and yes, Narelle found out. That cut on her forehead wasn't from hockey. She went over to Colleen's earlier this week, and they got into a little scrap. You don't think my wife killed her, do you? Narelle's an angry woman, but she's not a killer."

The cops said nothing, and Jarrett's tone grew desperate. "Listen, my wife's a tough lady. If she had wanted to hurt Colleen when they were mixing it up, she could have. Instead, Colleen bopped her with a rolling pin or something, and Narelle quit. Said it was almost funny. You've got to believe me, people, my wife is not a killer."

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Jarrett," said Miles, and the two officers started back to their car.

"Come on," said Jeff, pushing away the ten dollar bill in Miles's hand. They were in the chief's office, having just spent an hour on the phone with the New York state police tracking down Narelle. She was being held in Albany. "I'll pay for it myself, you don't have to bribe me."

"I'll give up juggling for a whole

afternoon if you just finish that haircut." Miles leaned back in his chair. "You're not a bad looking guy. I mean, you're no Tom Cruise, of course, but you're not so ugly you scare people. You should take better care of yourself."

"I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or a putdown," said Jeff, taking his coat off the rack.

When he walked into Red's Barber Shop, there was only one other customer, a logger named Skip Wills getting a cut. Old Homer McCafferty was working on Wills while Red was stretched out in the second chair reading the *Free Press*.

"Howdy," said Red, waxed handlebar mustache bobbing as he talked. "Come back to finish the job? I've got the time if you've—" He shook his head. "That's getting a bit old, isn't it? I'll have to come up with something new."

"That was too bad about the Demming girl," said Wills as Jeff settled into Red's chair. "I plow her drive. A pretty young thing like that committin' suicide."

Jeff nodded as Red fastened a gray sheet around his neck and smoothed it out over his body. The cloth reminded him of a shroud, and he shuddered. The mood in the barber shop was somber, each man lost in his own thoughts.

The bells on the front door tinkled, and Kaolin May entered, snowflakes flouring the shoulders of his sheepskin coat. He glanced coolly at Jeff and took one of the side chairs.

Jeff listened to the snip snip of the scissors, felt fingertips gently push his head, and stared blankly

at the floor, thinking of the finality of death. A loud *ha-choo* jarred him from his gloomy reverie.

"Dadgum allergies," said Red.

"Can't be ragweed this time of year," said Jeff.

"Cats." There was a pause, and Red added, "Visiting Jodie Stevens, who has two of them."

McCafferty finished with Wills, and Kaolin May took his place.

Jeff looked at May, puzzled. Didn't seem like he needed a haircut or his beard trimmed, but he was an elegant-looking man and also rich, so what was ten bucks to him?

"There you are," said Red. "Good as new." He snapped out the cloth and looked around. "Looks like I get another break." He plopped down into the chair Jeff had just vacated. Jeff paid, including a two dollar tip. "Thankee kindly," said Red, raising his paper.

Jeff was about to leave when something stopped him. Red was humming a tune behind his paper, his feet propped up on the metal footrest. He was wearing Nikes with a circular pattern in the tread and a knob in the center of each circle. The same pattern Jeff had seen in the Silly Putty on Colleen's floor. As he stared, he saw something else: a gob of red clay wedged into one of the circles.

He walked over to the coat rack and put on his coat, its shoulders still damp from melted snow.

"If you can't be good," called Red from behind his paper, "be careful."

Jeff stepped out into the falling snow.

"B-2," the moderator called out,

"B-2." Excitement was building in the old Town Hall, where Friday night bingo was in progress.

"One more number's all I need!" said a woman in a salmon pink sweater near the door when Jeff, in civvies, walked in. Farther down the table he caught Bea's eye. "Me?" she mouthed, pointing to herself, and when he nodded, she rose and came over.

"I didn't mean right now. Finish out the game."

"Lord I'm so far behind it doesn't matter."

"Bingo!" cried the woman in the pink sweater, and a general sigh of disappointment filled the hall.

Jeff and Bea went to a deserted corner near the popcorn and soda stand. "You've lived in Rock River all your life, Bea, probably know more about the people here than anyone else."

"Some of it I wish I didn't know."

"What can you tell me about Red Phelps?"

"The barber?" Bea frowned. "I can tell you I don't care for him. He pretends to be an oldtimer, spouts all those cute sayings, but underneath I think he's as crooked as the day is long. When he was ten or eleven, he would dress up in a Boy Scout uniform and go around collecting bottles, then cash them in and keep the money. The Scouts never saw a nickel. You've seen that house on Barberry Lane he moved into a year ago? Pretty fancy for a barber."

"How well did he know Colleen?"

Bea looked at him long and hard. "What's this about?" When Jeff didn't answer, she said, "Okay, I saw

him over at her house once, maybe twice, but I think it was just to look at her paintings, one of which he bought. I'll give him credit for that, at least he bought one of her paintings, but I can't believe there was any romance between them." Bea's eyes grew wide. "You don't think she killed herself because of him?"

"I don't think she killed herself."

Bea's face, still pale from her bout with the flu, went white. She started to totter, and Jeff held her up by the elbows and led her to the nearest empty chair.

"You don't think *he* did it?" she whispered.

"I can't answer that now. One more question. Was Red going with Jodie Stevens?"

"Was. Not any more. Why?" Bea nodded. "You can't answer that either, can you? Jeff?" Blinking back tears, she held the front of his jacket. "If that scumbag killed my baby, make sure he rots in jail for the rest of his sorry life."

"Now you're telling me some Silly Putty stuck to Red Phelps's shoe proves he killed Ms. Demming?" The chief looked hollow-eyed.

"The tread on his shoes," said Jeff, "is the same as the print in that clay. He's been sneezing a lot, too. Twice cutting my hair he almost sneezed down my neck. Says it's from his girlfriend Jodie Stevens' cats, but Bea says they've broken up. You saw Colleen's cat Midnight; there was cat fur all over the place. One more thing. All that old-timey talk of his like 'gol-durn' and 'dadgum'? He was into that stuff." Jeff picked up one of Miles's rubber

eggs and tossed it from hand to hand. "Grandma Moses is old-timey. I'll bet he was the one who got Colleen to start painting those fakes. You want to hear my theory?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Colleen had second thoughts about painting and selling those fakes and was about to turn herself in, and probably Red, too. He sensed that and fixed it so she couldn't."

Miles was staring at a corner of the room.

"What's wrong?"

"Do we have any more buckets? Another leak." He turned back to Jeff. "We need the town cheering for us, not laughing at us."

"Can I just ask Hotrod for a search warrant for Red's house to look for that shoe and maybe a Grandma Moses fake?"

Chief Watts was quiet for a long time. Finally he said, "Remember those tracks behind Demming's house? You were ready to call in NASA and the FBI: ART FORGER MURDERED BY ALIENS

Jeff's cheeks went hot.

Miles lowered his voice. "I like you, kid. You're naive as hell, but I like you. But I have to say this: I don't think you're going to make it as a cop. Maybe you should . . ." His voice trailed off, and when he spoke again, it was a little husky. ". . . try something else."

Jeff turned away so the chief wouldn't see him blinking, went into the squad room, and sat at his desk; he shuffled some papers without seeing the words. He felt a light pat on his shoulder. Sergeant Vance, her black hair shining under

the fluorescent light, set down a cup of hot chocolate.

"Thanks." Jeff tried to smile. "No marshmallow?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Chief mean to you again?"

"Yeah. But that's the way he is. He says what he thinks, and I respect that."

"He's tired, Jeff. Really tired. He lives to retire and put on shows for kids."

"I know. Funny thing is, I really like the guy. I know he wants to get rid of me, but I still like him."

Wendy said nothing, but her eyes glistened a little. She pushed her coffee cup around on his desk. And something strange happened to Jeff then. He didn't know why but he felt energized.

"I'm gonna get that skunk."

Wendy's jaw dropped. "Miles?"

"No, no. Red Phelps. He killed her, Wendy, and one way or another I'm going to prove it."

Neither one heard Miles step into the room. When he cleared his throat, they looked over. "I'd like to apologize," he said to Jeff. "I was out of line a minute ago. You think Hotrod'll give you a search warrant, go for it."

"Do I look senile?" Judge Austin "Hotrod" Harris resembled a space invader in his black helmet, its Plexiglas visor pushed up, a padded skiddoo suit, and silver moon boots. Four or five other skiddooers milled around nearby preparing for a trail ride. Jeff had never seen the judge so alive, eyes bright, nostrils flaring. Certainly not in the courtroom.

This was Saturday morning. It had stopped snowing, and sunlight sparkled on the fresh snow.

Without thinking, Jeff blurted, "Not yet, Your Honor."

The judge stared at him and then burst out laughing. "Not yet, eh? I like your honesty, son. By the way, what do you call a lawyer with an IQ of fifty?"

"Got me."

"'Your Honor,' " said Harris, chuckling. He lowered his voice so the others wouldn't hear. "So you think Phelps did it? What does Miles say?"

"He's sort of skeptical. But I'll bet anything Phelps did it. Red used to sell snowmobiles, didn't he?"

"That's right. Sold me a lemon once. Doggone thing broke down on Long Pond, and I almost froze to death. Do you know what was strange about that? A kid I'd sent to the Correctional Center in St. Johnsbury for three months happened by and got my rig going again. I tried to pay him, but he wouldn't hear of it. He knew who I was, too. Life's full of surprises, isn't it?"

Jeff told the judge about the Silly Putty on Red's shoe and his allergy to cats and had started to describe his Boy Scout scam when Hotrod raised a gloved hand.

"Irrelevant. I don't want to hear it. Have to judge each case on its merits." He tapped the pillion of his Cheetah. "Hop on," he said, then added over his shoulder, "And hang on."

They took off so fast, Jeff was almost thrown. Cresting a mogul, they went airborne for two feet

amid laughter and cheers from the other snowmobilers, then roared down a slope toward a still-open brook.

"You're not going over that brook are you?" cried Jeff.

"Why not?" shouted the judge as they leapt the brook and went up the other side in a plume of snow. They weaved through a maplewood, crossed a wide field, and stopped at the judge's modest white clapboard house. Harris jumped off and in less than three minutes was back with a signed search warrant.

Red had left the back door unlocked, and Jeff walked into the red brick Georgian off Bayberry Lane. It was oppressively quiet: no dog barked, no TV or radio played, no furnace hummed.

Golf trophies were neatly ranged along the mantelpiece in the living room, and a ten-point deer head loomed over a velveteen sofa.

He rummaged through the hall closet, found nothing, and moved on to a large bedroom with a queen-sized bed and a walk-in closet. His heartbeat speeded up at the sight of a row of shoes, all the toes in a straight line: saddle shoes, black brogans, a great variety of others, no Nikes. Looking around, he spotted a pair of Nike joggers under the bed. He picked up the nearest shoe and stared at a circular tread and in one of the circles a gob of something red. He put both shoes in a plastic evidence bag. But there was something else he hoped to find, so he kept looking. Finally, in the closet of an upstairs bedroom, he saw the back of a pressed board. He

turned the painting around. It was of two people working in a vegetable garden, while on the lawn a boy played with a stick and hoop and two girls teetered on a seesaw. With its childlike figures and busy vitality, the work was unmistakably Grandma Moses, or a good imitation. It was signed "Moses," with the characteristic period after the name.

Corporal Hanley felt a surge of triumph, but also a sadness to be holding something Colleen Demming had made, even though it was a fake.

"What a waste," he murmured.

"You make a point of entering people's houses uninvited?" sneered Red from the doorway.

"I've got a search warrant."

"For what?"

"These?" Jeff held up the Nikes.

The mustached face managed a puzzled expression. "You going into the secondhand shoe business?"

"This is a criminal investigation, Mr. Phelps. You don't have to say anything without your lawyer."

"There's been talk of getting rid of you, kid. Ever since you plowed into that selectman's car. That's going to be more than just talk now."

"My warrant also includes this." Jeff held up the painting. "Red Phelps, I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Colleen Demming."

As he set down the painting and reached for his handcuffs, Jeff looked up to see the black barrel of a .32 automatic.

"You ain't arresting no one, bright boy. Those handcuffs are going to come in real handy because I'm go-

ing to—" Red whirled just as Sergeant Vance appeared behind him with a drawn 9mm police pistol. There was a deafening explosion, and Wendy sagged to one side; her own pistol belched fire, and Red howled, his .32 clattering to the floor, blood spurting from his wrist.

Jeff leaped for the gun, kicking it across the floor, but Red made no move toward it. Clamping his wrist to stanch the blood, he sank to the floor. A string of gasped oaths a bit stronger than "gol-durn" and "Jeezum Crow" issued from under the waxed mustache.

Jeff went to his fellow officer, who was leaning against the doorjamb.

"Wendy?"

"Miles told me you might be coming here," she said, smiling. "I'll ... be okay. Just grazed."

Jeff's mother, sitting in the first pew, pulled a polka-dot handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes. June sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows of the First Congregational Church. Forrest Hanley, in a rented blue suit, most of the grime scrubbed from his fingernails, was best man. Because Wendy's father had deserted the family years ago, Miles, also in a blue suit, gave her away. The small gathering of friends and family included Colleen Demming's brother Rodney and his wife, and her niece Crystal. Shortly after Red's arrest, the Demmings had invited Jeff for dinner, and the four of them had hit it off.

After the ceremony the guests went to Wendy's house, a converted carriage shed, for the reception. On

the tiny back lawn a trestle table held platters of ham and sliced turkey, an unspiked punch, a ceramic bowl full of fresh fruit, and a modest two-tiered wedding cake. During the lull in congratulations, Rodney Demming, a sandwich in one hand and lips quivering with emotion, came over to Jeff. "I just want to say how happy I am for you," he blurted, "and how much we appreciate what you did for us. Catching that ..."

Jeff patted Demming's arm, and then brightened. "Say, do you remember that last painting of Colleen's, the one on her easel of the frog sailing toward Caboodle?"

Rodney lifted a pleased eyebrow. "You mentioned that when you were over for dinner." He tilted his head toward a card table laden with wrapped gifts. "Who knows. You may not have seen the last of it."

"Great," said Jeff. "You know, she was such a good painter I never understood why ..." He shrugged.

"She'd fake someone else's work? All I can think of is Colleen wasn't making much money as an artist. That house she lived in was paid for by money our father left us, and that bothered her. Didn't bother me, though; I blew my share in six months. But Colleen longed to make it on her own." Demming looked at his half-eaten sandwich. "I guess she longed too hard. You think that sleaze of a barber killed her because she was going to turn herself and him in?"

"Looks that way. He's still not talking, though; claims your sister planted that Grandma Moses fake

in his house. I can't wait for the trial to begin because we've got a state's attorney who'll make both Red and his lawyer look like monkeys."

They heard an excited yelp behind them and turned. Miles had just produced a plum from behind Crystal's ear.

"That's quite a police chief you've got," said Colleen's brother.

They watched Miles juggle four plums, but things went awry when he attempted a behind-the-back maneuver. Clapping and laughing, the kids gathered up the fruit from the grass. Demming wandered off with his daughter, and Miles came over. "You're getting good," said Jeff.

"Hey, the other day I had five eggs going at once."

"Your new career when you retire from the force," said Jeff. "Speaking

of new careers, I've had an offer I can't refuse, to go back into house-painting."

Miles spilled cranberry juice on his sleeve.

"It'll be better for the department. I wasn't really meant to be a cop."

"What are you talking about?" Chief didn't bother even to brush at the punch. "You're a fine officer. There's only one problem, though, Sergeant Hanley, you need another haircut. Now, go and join your bride. She's looking this way."

Jeff got halfway to where Wendy stood talking to Forrest and stopped. Something clicked. Miles had called him Sergeant. Sergeant Hanley.

He thought about it a moment and decided that didn't sound bad at all.

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UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

Detective Phil Depperstein was not in his best humor. It was Sunday morning, and he'd had to forgo his after-breakfast coffee to respond to the emergency call from the Excelsior Hotel. "Okay," he growled at the manager, "what's the problem?"

"It's murder!" answered the nervous little man. "The guest from Indianapolis has been murdered in his room!"

"Okay," sighed Depperstein. "Lead me to the scene."

The man had been repeatedly stabbed, undoubtedly with the letter opener that was still embedded in his chest. The victim's wife was sprawled in a chair in a state of shock. Finally she calmed down enough to say, "It was one of the other wives here for the convention. She b-b-barged in and started s-s-stabbing my poor husband." Fresh tears welled up.

"What convention?" snapped the detective.

"I think I can answer that," said the hotel manager. "Salesmen of the E-Z-Pick Toothpick Company hold their annual convention here every year. A different salesman and his wife, including Mr. and Mrs. Stanley, arrived each day the past week, starting Sunday. I recall that one husband is named Frank and one wife is named Flora. The couples registered from different cities; one was from Laredo."

Depperstein glanced up from his notebook to ask, "Where are they?"

"My desk clerk assigned each to a different floor. Their rooms are on floors two through ten except that none is on floors four or eight."

"Okay, get them together in your office for questioning."

The detective learned the following:

(1) The victim from Indianapolis had a room two floors below Mr. Orwell and two floors above Belinda's husband. Their first names are Bert, Donald, and George (in some order).

(2) The couple on the third floor arrived the day after the couple from Moline and the day before Alice and her husband. Their last names are Parsons, Tuttle, and Umbolt (in some order).

(3) The man arriving on Friday was assigned a room immediately

below Andrew (who is not married to Cindy) and two floors above Mr. Parsons (who is not George). They came from Helena, Kansas City, and Moline (in some order).

(4) Neither Andrew (who is not married to Alice) nor Mr. Tuttle arrived on Monday.

(5) Eloise had a room two floors below Mrs. Randle and immediately above the woman who arrived on Thursday. None of the three is married to Edgar or the man from New Orleans.

(6) Claude and Mr. Quimby arrived on successive days (in one order or the other).

(7) Bert (who is not Belinda's husband) was assigned a room just below Gilda.

(8) The couple from Jacksonville were not on the second floor.

(9) The woman from Kansas City (who is not Mrs. Parsons) arrived the day after Doris and the day before the woman on floor nine. They are married (in some order) to Bert, Claude, and Donald.

During the questioning the woman on the floor adjacent to the victim's broke down and confessed. "Yes," she said, "I stabbed the scoundrel! He was blackmailing me, threatening to tell my husband about our affair during last year's convention."

Detective Phil Depperstein read the killer her rights as her shocked husband looked on and the victim's wife began sobbing anew.

*Who murdered whom, thereby quite unconventionally
disrupting the convention of toothpick salesmen?*

See page 139 for the solution to the February puzzle.

MAYHEM ON MARKET STREET

Dick Stodghill



The pathetic whining of the old dog Casey jarred me from a dreamless sleep. I had not closed my bedroom door tightly, so the Bauer family's shaggy, streetwise mutt had nosed it open and now rested his chin on the edge of my bed. Tears streamed from his eyes—and from mine. Had it not been for the bewildered, unhappy dog, I might have believed I had been struck down in my prime by some mysterious affliction that had set my eyes afire and had me crying like a baby.

Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

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Then I became aware of the noise outside: men shouting, guns firing. Tear gas, that was the cause of my crying. And Casey's, too, of course. What was happening? This was friendly, familiar East Akron in the spring of 1938, not the Somme in 1916.

My reporter's instincts clicked into gear, and I hurried into yesterday's clothes, descended the stairs two at a time, ran down the hallway and out onto Dudley Street. Not the most prudent move, all things considered, but one that would have met with the approval of my boss, *Times-Press* city editor Ben Goldsmith.

A few men went running past, but beyond the chainlink fence where Dudley ended thirty yards away at Willard Street, a real mob was on the loose in East Akron Cemetery. Several tombstones toppled in the time it took me to run to the corner, where a fresh wave of gas assaulted my eyes and nostrils.

I yelled, "What's happening?" at a man who came over the fence, ripping his pants and gashing his arm in the process.

He ran on, looking back over his shoulder to call: "The coppers come out of the plant and went for us. Better run for it!"

I did, but down Willard toward East Market Street a block away. It was a reporter's job to head for the action, not away from it. That's what I was paid to do.

When I stopped at the intersection across from Goodyear's Willard Street Gatehouse, it was like nothing I had seen before. The plate-glass window of the Lenox Cafe on the corner was shattered, blood ran in the gutters, company guards and city policemen wearing gas masks wielded their billy clubs, and more than a few had guns in hand. Some of the civilians, Goodyear men, fought back with ball bats and tire chains.

We should have seen it coming. Goodrich had just signed an agreement with the union, leaving Goodyear as the lone holdout among the Big Three rubber companies in refusing to recognize or deal with the United Rubber Workers. Along with that, employees were disgruntled because the firm was laying off workers without regard to seniority. The previous day an unexpected sitdown strike had begun across the street at Plant One.

Now a full-blown riot was raging on the streets and among the graves in the cemetery. I watched open-mouthed, but not for long. From the corner of my eye I saw an Akron policeman sprinting toward me, nightstick swinging above his head. I started to raise my hand and call out that I was an observer, a newspaperman, but my protest was cut short by an explosion inside my head.

I was dimly aware of lying on the sidewalk, of hearing gunshots and cries of anger and fear. I heard the sound of feet pounding past me, and I heard the twang of a bullet ricocheting off metal. I mustered what little strength was left to me and crawled back along Willard Street to a small lot behind the Lenox. Then the lights went out.



Dawn was breaking as I slowly came awake. Jack Eddy was kneeling beside me, cursing under his breath as he examined the wound on my head. In a semicircle behind him stood the residents of Bauer's boardinghouse, including all of the Bauer family except Bus, the head of the household and an ardent union man at Goodyear.

"We can't find Daddy," said the vivacious Kitty, eldest of the family's three children. "Have you seen him?"

The question was absurd. Couldn't the empty-headed girl see the condition I was in? I lifted my head from the ground, seeing blood still collected in the gutter and more of it close by that was my own. "I haven't seen anybody. Not since that cop crowned me for no reason at all."

"Think you can walk, buddy?" asked Jack. He was hoisting me to my feet without waiting for an answer. My knees buckled after a couple of tentative steps, but he held on tight to keep me from falling.

He said, "Bram Geary, ace reporter, felled in the line of duty." Then he laughed.

If only a photographer had been there to capture the expressions on the faces around me. Sweat was rolling down pudgy Mabel Klosterman's ghastly-pale cheeks; prim and proper Nora Ferrabee was as outraged as if some ragamuffin had lifted her skirt; old Mr. Reimer had the gray look of someone more dead than alive. Kitty was totally bewildered, but Mrs. Bauer and her oldest son, Paul, appeared ready to take on an army, preferably an army of Akron policemen. Twelve-year-old Artie Bauer, however, was having the time of his young life. And old Casey was back to normal, his tail wagging a little as he tried to understand why all the people in his usually tranquil world were behaving so strangely.

It wasn't far to the boardinghouse, not much more than a hundred yards, but it seemed like miles. Climbing the porch steps was like scaling Everest, but once inside I insisted on calling Ben Goldsmith before receiving any treatment.

He was less than sympathetic. "Get down here, Geary," he said. "We had three men and a photographer out there, so you can work with them on adding a personal touch. First, though, drive around the area and see how things stand now."

That's what I did after Jack and Mabel had cleansed my wound and poured on something that burned like the fires of hell. "He should be in the hospital," said Mabel.

"What, for a little tap on the noggin?" replied Jack. "Forget it, he's okay." I guess that lack of concern was all that could be expected from a hard-bitten private eye.

As I started out, I saw two round black marks on the side of the house where tear gas shells had hit. I checked my olive green Hupmobile sedan for damage. It had emerged unscathed.

East Market Street, usually alive with people, was deserted. A machine gun pointed downward from the Goodyear clock tower, another was



mounted on the steps of the Goodyear State Bank. Beneath the small bridge on Case Avenue a policeman's motorcycle lay on its side in the shallow water of the Little Cuyahoga River. Men who replaced window glass were going to have a field day.

As the day wore on, more of the story would come out. Housewives leaving the Rialto Theater after Bank Night found themselves in the middle of the melee, and some were chased and beaten by policemen. More than a hundred people went to hospitals. Mayor Lee D. Schroy had sent his boys in blue to join company guards in staging the attack, thereby ingratiating himself with the city's industrialists and ensuring his defeat at the next election. Like residents of any blue-collar town, Akronites didn't look kindly on cops assaulting workers, let alone women coming out of a theater. Newspaper reporters . . . well, maybe.

Jack Eddy had found Bus Bauer at a temporary union headquarters on Case Avenue. It had been hastily set up after the police had burned their headquarters across from Plant One. I drove east again on Market Street until I saw the rest of the Bauer clan and told them to go home, Bus was okay and would be there.

When I arrived at the *Times-Press* building downtown, Ben Goldsmith was trying to hide his disgust as he explained to the newsroom staff the manner in which the top brass had decided to play the story: the workers were to blame, and the police were just doing their job of maintaining law and order.

That was a charade in which I refused to take part. Life on the police beat bore no resemblance to an afternoon tea at the Women's Club, but I loved my job. Even so, I was ready to hand Goldsmith my resignation when he looked up from where he was talking on the phone and said, "Drop that, Geary, let the others handle it. There's been a murder, and I want you out there."

"Where?"

"Around the corner from that dump where you live. Willard Street."

Had all of East Akron gone suddenly mad? Riots, murders, what next?

"Was this connected with the riot?" I said.

"How the hell would I know? That's what I'm sending you to find out. Get moving."

Artie Bauer, on his way to Kent School, was bent over picking something up and putting it in a cigar box as I turned off East Market onto Willard. I stopped to ask what he was doing.

"Pickin' up empty tear gas shells to show the girls. The ones that live over by Arlington Street and missed the fun." He showed me the box half filled with red cardboard casings.

"You'd better be careful, Artie. If you let kids smell those things and they get sick, you could be in big trouble."

He laughed scornfully. "Just the girls. The pretty ones, I mean. They won't snitch on me."



Artie Bauer, Big Man for a Day. Well, maybe I'd have done the same thing when I was his age and headed for another boring day in sixth grade at the decrepit old building on South Arlington.

"Me and Hawkeye seen 'em before it started," he said.

"Saw what?"

"The guys on strike. We was comin' back from the Troop 45 Scout meetin' up in Goodyear Heights, and they had Market Street practically blocked off. Guys with clubs and tire chains, stuff like that."

"And you didn't tell me?" I was hot under the collar. "I could have been there right at the beginning. Thanks a lot, Artie."

He hung his head for a few seconds, then lifted it again and stared at me defiantly. "You was up in your room already when I got home. Besides, what'd you ever do for me?"

I could think of a hundred things, but when I opened the car door to start after him he took off at a dead run, stopping at the corner just long enough to raise one finger in the air and give me the raspberry.

The scene of the murder was near the far end of the street. I was hoping to find Plato Largis in charge of the investigation. Instead it was a young detective named Ed Mayhew. From the time of our first meeting, we had taken a dislike to each other. He had no use for reporters, and I didn't think much of his slipshod methods, his desire for a quick and easy solution to any assignment.

This case was right up his alley. Another sordid ending of a life when words failed and a gun was handy. In this instance, the victim's own gun. He was a man of about fifty who had lived with a grown daughter since divorcing his wife a year earlier. He had been shot twice from behind in the kitchen of the two story house. I recognized Red Spivey as a man. I had seen discussing union business with Bus Bauer at the boardinghouse. The daughter, Esther, was nowhere to be seen.

A gabby neighbor was giving Mayhew his view of what had happened even though he hadn't been there when the shots were fired. When Mayhew had heard enough, he sent the man on his way and headed for me, a supercilious grin on his face.

"Open and shut from the look of it," he said. "Spivey stomped the day-lights out of the daughter's boyfriend and sent him packing yesterday evening. The girl took off in hysterics. Pretty obvious that the boyfriend, a kid named Andy Butler, came back and took care of the old man. He and the daughter have probably headed for the hills."

I bit my tongue to keep from saying, "Obvious to whom?" Mayhew had settled on the Butler youth as the killer without bothering to consider the daughter, the ex-wife, or that it might have had something to do with union business, the riot, or a hundred other possibilities. Unless the kid had an airtight alibi, he was in for it when Mayhew tracked him down.

I went back to the newsroom and wrote the story, such as it was, without mentioning Mayhew's easy solution. It didn't matter, it would get short

shrift on a day when the riot would dominate the pages of the *Times-Press* and the rival *Beacon Journal*. The latter's police reporter, Tom Kennedy, had been at the house while I was there and had shown the same enthusiasm for the story that I had. And like me he felt that, sans alibi, Andy Butler was a dead duck.

By the time I headed home late in the afternoon, Butler had been in custody for several hours. He had been picked up at the house on Talbot Street where he lived with his parents and two sisters. His face was a mess from the beating, and he was covered with bruises. He said he had been despondent over being humiliated in front of his girl and being ordered to never darken her door again. He had walked the streets for most of the night without seeing anyone he knew or stopping someplace where people might remember seeing him. As he told me this, Mayhew wore a self-satisfied smirk.

Esther Spivey went home after she'd heard about the murder while listening to the radio at a friend's house. She said she'd fled after watching her boyfriend take the beating and, like Butler, had wanted to be alone, so she had spent hours at a downtown theater. Again like Butler, she had seen no one she knew and lacked an alibi for the time of the killing. She told Mayhew that her father had kept his gun, a small-caliber pistol, in a kitchen table drawer. He'd made a habit of showing it to nearly everyone who visited the house, so its location was far from secret.

I went straight to bed after telling Mrs. Bauer not to call me for supper. Nothing could have convinced her that I was in bad shape as effectively as that. My last thought before my head hit the pillow was that a person needed to be very careful about spending time alone and unaccounted for just in case someone he knew happened to be murdered.

Luckily I had the next day off work, so it was midmorning before I showed my face downstairs. After giving me a critical looking over, Mrs. Bauer rushed to the kitchen and prepared a heaping breakfast of bacon and eggs, hash browns, sausage, orange juice, and coffee for me. This was unheard of for boarders on any day other than Sunday. I still had little appetite, but my brain was functioning enough to keep that fact hidden from Ivy Bauer. Had I not eaten, or even just picked at my food, I'm sure an ambulance would have pulled up at the front door.

Sue Baney arrived shortly after I forced down the last of the food on my plate. Mabel Klosterman had phoned her to say that her sometime boyfriend was at death's door, or words to that effect. Apparently everyone had the day off work because what was left of the morning passed with Sue, Mabel, Kitty, Nora Ferrabee, and Mrs. Bauer taking turns looking at me, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads. It would have been more relaxing for me if it had been a workday. I really wanted to go upstairs and lie down, but doing so would only have convinced them that I was a goner.

The riot had shaken both the union and the company leaders. They



reached an agreement on Sunday, and everyone was back at work on Tuesday. After supper that evening, Jack Eddy cornered me on the front porch and began pumping me for information on the Spivey murder.

Andy Butler's family, correctly believing that the police investigation was over, had hired Wellington's National Detective Agency to dig beyond the surface. As an assistant manager of the agency's Akron branch, Jack Eddy had assigned the case to Cliff Austin. An hour later Austin twisted his ankle while stepping off a curb, putting himself out of action for a week or more. The rest of the agency's operatives were either busy on other cases or lacked sufficient experience for a major assignment, so Jack took over himself. Now he wanted to know what I could tell him that hadn't appeared in the newspaper.

"There's nothing to tell, Jack," I said. "How come you always manage to get your nose into these things?"

"Because we deliver the goods, buddy. We have a reputation. The public knows how we operate."

He was half right. Wellington's delivered, that was true, but the public had no idea of the way the agency operated. The police had rules and regulations to follow; Jack Eddy and his breed paid little more heed to the law than did the crooks and killers.

"Tell me something, Jack, have you ever had a client who was guilty?"

"Never," he said in that supremely confident, overbearing way of his that could be so annoying. "If we find one who is, we drop him like a hot potato."

That was another of his irritating habits, always working a cliché into everything he said. Whenever his name was mentioned, the same picture leaped to my mind: a cocksure expression on his square, thin-lipped face, a cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth, his collar unbuttoned and necktie loosened, his fingers running through thinning sandy hair, statements pouring from his mouth with the staccato beat of a machine gun and often followed by a humorless laugh.

He was a hard and overly ambitious man, Jack Eddy. A reliable friend, though, and a fine detective, as well as a lucky one who always seemed to catch the breaks. He had put me on the trail of numerous big stories, so I told him what I knew of the case that had gone unwritten. It wasn't enough to make a decent-sized paragraph.

Jack left in pursuit of something or someone, so after listening to Kenny Baker sing "Love Walked In" on Bus Bauer's big Grunow radio, I called Sue Baney, then picked her up at her apartment on Massillon Road. It wasn't much of a date—a movie at Loew's, a hamburger at a drive-in called the Pilot across from the airport, a goodnight kiss that ended with her slapping my hand and rushing inside without issuing an invitation for me to tag along.

I won a wager with myself the next day when Jack Eddy strolled into

the newsroom just after deadline. His method of operating had become predictable to me after being around him for more than a year. He had other matters than just lunch in mind, of course, but we walked north on Main Street to my usual lunchroom, Ptomaine Tommie's, but it had changed hands and now was called Kippy's. Jack felt the new name was an improvement. I liked the old one better. It was unique, had distinction and character.

Jack allowed me to talk baseball for a minute or two, then broke into the middle of a sentence with: "The Spivey broad was no angel, you know."

"I didn't know, and I don't really care. No one in Akron cares."

"She and her old man fought like cats and dogs. He fixed her up with an out-of-town union organizer, and she wanted no part of the guy."

"And that makes her no angel? Come off it, Jack."

"Finish that burger, will you. We're going out to union headquarters, buddy."

"I have a job, Jack. It's time for my afternoon rounds and after that—"

"Later, friend, later. My car's parked just around the corner."

So we drove out to Case Avenue in his 1932 Auburn sedan, a car I secretly coveted. I liked my Hupmobile, a fine car and a beauty, but Jack's brown Auburn was a classic. To Jack Eddy it was just a means of getting from one place to another.

"What's this lover boy's name?" I asked.

"Guido Minardi." He pronounced it Gee-dough with a hard G.

"It's Gwee, not Gee. Gwee-dough."

"Well, pardon me for living, pal. Just think, without you I might have committed a real *faux pas*." He pronounced it *fox paw*, but I kept my mouth shut. I had learned that when Jack Eddy called you buddy or friend, he meant it. When it was pal, sport, chief, or Mac, you knew you were not among his favorite people. It didn't matter; an hour later he would have forgotten about being mad. Or, as Jack would have put it in cliché-fashion, when it came to relationships, he blew hot and cold.

Minardi was not there when we arrived. We were greeted by one of the local union officers, a big, strapping man named Nick Bicanic. "Red Spivey was a good union man," he said, "but a hothead. Beating up that kid was just like him. Hard to blame the kid for going back and getting even."

Jack let the implication pass. He said, "So Spivey must have made a lot of enemies, right?"

Bicanic smiled. He had a good smile, one that came across as sincere and friendly, but he was the hail-fellow-well-met type who talked loudly and emphatically so that whenever he spoke you could almost see the exclamation marks floating in the air. He was not the type of man I cared to be around. He said, "Red did his share of fighting, but the guys understood it was just his nature. Enemies? Naw, I can't think of a one."

"Well somebody sure didn't think he was a real prince," said Jack, "and



it wasn't the Butler kid. Everybody who knows him says he was gentle as a lamb."

Bicanic gave us another smile. "Those quiet ones can fool you. Boy, can they ever." Jack looked ready for an argument, but at that moment Guido Minardi walked in. Along with his other habits that didn't appeal to me, Bicanic was a back-slapper. He gave Jack a hard one, said, "Here's the guy you're looking for," and made the introductions. Then he left for a late lunch so we were alone with Minardi, who, it turned out, had come over from Pittsburgh to help the local union boys get started.

He was a goodlooking man in a slick, oily way. A salesman type, outgoing and probably persuasive with a lot of people. I wasn't any more fond of his kind than I was of Bicanic's, and I could see that Jack wasn't at all taken with him. He didn't even try to be polite or hide his antagonism. Doing so would not have been Jack Eddy's way.

"I hear you tried to make it with Esther Spivey," he said, "but she gave you the cold shoulder. Or did her old man change his mind about you and put the kibosh on it?"

Minardi's smile wasn't as pleasant as Bicanic's. "You couldn't be more wrong, fella. Esther and I didn't hit it off, sure, and Red was steamed about it, but he put the blame on her, not me. Gave her a bad time, but Red had the wrong idea. It was just a case where neither one of us went for the other. Know what I mean?"

Despite not caring for the man, I believed him. So did Jack, apparently, because we left soon after that. He was in a foul mood on the way back downtown.

Artie Bauer was bouncing a tennis ball off the side of the house and catching it in his fielder's glove when I got home late that afternoon. He had been avoiding me since the tear gas episode but was all smiles when I said, "How about a game of catch?"

He ran to get a beatup old baseball covered with black friction tape while I went up to my room and rummaged around in the closet until I found my glove. We tossed the ball back and forth for half an hour; then I said it was time to take a break. We sat on the front steps, neither of us saying anything, until I felt the time was ripe and asked, "How's school going these days?"

"Same old boring stuff," he said, looking disgusted. That changed to a grin as he added, "Only two more weeks till summer vacation."

"Ever think about what you want to do when you grow up?"

"Nope."

"You'll have to one of these days. What kind of a job would you like to have?"

He thought it over. "An easy one . . . like yours."

I swallowed a retort that leaped to mind and instead said, "You'd like that, Artie. Lots of excitement, something different every day. You'd never get bored, that's for sure."



"Yeah, that's the kind of job I want."

"You could handle it, but there's something you have to do before they'd hire you. You have to learn to talk right, speak proper English. All those things they try to teach you in school are important, so you'll have to work a lot harder in seventh grade."

"Sure, and have all the guys make fun of me."

"I studied hard when I went to Kent School, and nobody made fun of me."

"Yeah, back in the Dark Ages." He started laughing. "How'd you get there, in a horse and buggy?"

That was enough for me. I gave up and went inside to get ready for supper. Jack Eddy was a real bear at the table, sullen and surly whenever anyone spoke to him. It was apparent he wasn't getting anywhere on the Spivey case. I couldn't help but feel a little satisfaction at seeing the mighty Jack Eddy traveling a hard road like the rest of us.

After enjoying a second helping of Ivy Bauer's incomparable beef stew, topped off with lemon pie, I joined most of the others in the living room. Kitty had beaten her father to the radio and was listening to music. The Ozzie Nelson band was backing up Harriet Hilliard on one of the hits of the day, "Says My Heart." Harriet was bemoaning the fact that whenever romance was about to enter her life she ran for cover because her old schoolteacher's heart kept ringing in false alarms. Like they said, things were tough all over.

I got up to leave when Rudy Vallee came on singing the off-beat "Vieni Vieni," a song I could tolerate the first ten thousand times I heard it but no longer. A good book, Christie's *Murder in Mesopotamia*, was waiting in my room, but I was only halfway up the stairs when Jack Eddy came charging out of his room, grabbed my arm, and swung me around while saying, "Let's go, buddy. Beer time."

What he failed to say was that, before heading for the Lenox Cafe by turning right on Willard Street, we were going to turn left and pay Esther Spivey a visit. When I realized what he had in mind, I said, "Why, Jack? I don't want to."

"Save it for another time, friend. Business before pleasure."

"It's not my business, Jack. That doesn't mean anything to you, does it?"

He didn't bother to answer, which wasn't a surprise. I was hoping she wouldn't be home. A vain hope, as it turned out, because I should have known Jack would have phoned her before starting out.

It was the first time I'd seen Esther Spivey. She wasn't an attractive girl, at least in my opinion. Her features were good, her figure too, but she was a little hardbitten for my taste. That wasn't uncommon among East Akron girls, but unlike many of them, she hadn't retained her femininity through rough times. To be charitable about it, I conceded that her recent times had been rougher than most.



Jack had talked to her on several earlier occasions without learning much of importance even though she wanted to help him get her boyfriend out of jail. All he could do was go over the same ground, hoping that some new angle might develop. I couldn't help wonder if she might want things to remain just as they were because it had been her finger on the trigger. Cynicism is an unpleasant trait developed by most reporters after they've been on the job for a while.

Jack led her through a minute-by-minute account of the day her father died. It was boring, hearing what she ate for breakfast, why she had the day off from her job as sales clerk at Akron Dry Goods, and on and on and on. But I decided to butt in with a question when she said Red Spivey had been in a particularly unpleasant mood that day. "Why?" I asked. "Being a big union man, I should think he would have been excited about the strike that had just started."

She hesitated a moment before saying, "Well, now that I think about it, he had been that way all week. Mean and nasty, I mean. He didn't go in to work until six in the evening—well, with the strike he didn't go in at all that day—but for days all he did was sit at the kitchen table going over union papers again and again. I asked what he was doing one day, and he bit my head off."

"What kind of union papers?" asked Jack.

"How should I know? Just a big stack of papers. All columns of numbers, stuff like that. Before he'd leave for work, he'd lock them up in a tin box; then first thing in the morning he'd get them out again."

"How about taking a look at what's in that box?"

Esther went to a large cabinet in the dining room, the kind some people called a breakfront. The room was adjacent to the one we were in, and she was visible to us. After opening a drawer, she turned to us and said, "It isn't here. This is where he always kept it." She rummaged through the rest of the cabinet, then shrugged and returned empty-handed.

Jack Eddy had her go on reciting the rest of the day's events, and I was wondering if the telling wasn't going to take longer than the living had when he decided to knock off for the night. By then it was so late we passed up the beer at the Lenox.

Jack hadn't said anything on the walk home, but after we climbed the stairs to our rooms he gave me a painful one-knuckle punch on the arm and said, "That was a good question you asked, buddy. Should have thought of it myself."

"A better one is what happened to the tin box."

"Right. So the next question is how do we find out?"

The following morning I buttonholed Ed Mayhew while making my rounds at Central Police Station. He laughed when I told him he should check out what it was about the union that was bothering Red Spivey. "Because some shamus is nosing around? You're even dumber than I thought. That case is wrapped up and forgotten, fella."



True enough as far as he was concerned. Later on I took Plato Largis aside and asked if there weren't a way to work around Mayhew's stone-walling.

"Sure there is," Plato said. "Go over his head to the top brass. But if you do, there isn't a cop in Akron who'll ever give you the time of day again. A man may be the most inept guy on the force, but if he catches heat from up above because of an outsider, they'll close ranks behind him."

He was right, of course. The only way to open up Mayhew's mind was to hand him the killer along with a signed confession.

After supper that evening Jack Eddy told me he'd been tied up on other matters all day but now he wanted to talk with Bus Bauer. After a six-hour shift in Goodyear's vulcanizing pit, Bus usually wanted to be left alone, left to sit by his radio and relax, but after a little arm-twisting by Jack, he reluctantly agreed to accompany us to the Lenox for a beer.

Jack Eddy was never one to waste time on amenities, so before Bus could take a sip from his Carling's Black Label bottle, he said, "What's going on at your union that had Red Spivey shook up?"

Bus scowled. "What goes on with the union is our business, nobody else's."

"Look, Bus, this is murder we're talking about. Red was your friend, so if something was going on that got him killed, it was more than union business, right?"

Bus had to think that one over for a minute. "Yeah, I suppose you're right, but if Red knew somethin' wasn't right, I sure don't know what in hell it was."

"The union doesn't have any money, does it?"

"Sure, we have money. We pay dues, you know, and some other unions have pitched in to help us in our fight to get organized."

"So who handles this money?"

"I don't pay no attention to the inner workings. Why should I? I ain't an officer, you know. Nick Bicanic, he's the head man, but he ain't the treasurer. That's Arnie DePaolo, if I remember correctly. They're both straight shooters, so if you're thinkin' one of them was up to somethin', you're crazy."

Jack knew he wasn't going to learn anything more from Bus. He wasn't happy, but we had another beer and talked a little baseball before leaving for home. Bus went inside to his radio while Jack and I sat on the porch swing for a while. He was frustrated and not good company. After ten minutes or so he got up to go inside, saying, "Tomorrow we talk to this DePaolo, buddy."

"Look, Jack, I have—" but he was gone.

Artie came wandering home from somewhere, probably from getting up to mischief with his pal Hawkeye. He paused long enough to say, "Hello, Bram. How are you?"

I nearly fell off the swing. Artie Bauer being polite? And speaking un-

derstandable English? Had my talk with him done some good? Surely not.

It was raining the next day when Jack Eddy stopped by the newsroom shortly after deadline, so my enthusiasm for going back outside was at zero level. I did, of course, but only after Jack agreed to stop at a diner on Exchange Street before going on to union headquarters. In my opinion, eating took precedence over investigating any day.

Nick Bicanic greeted us politely, if not warmly. Who wants to have a private eye and a reporter coming around? He cooled a little more when Jack mentioned money. "That's Arnie DePaolo's department," he said. "When we take any in, it goes straight to him."

"Does this guy from Pittsburgh ever get his hands on it?"

"Minardi? Naw, 'course not. I don't know what you're after, mister, but our records are not open to the public. DePaolo or anyone else will tell you the same thing, but if you want to talk to him, that's him at the desk in the corner."

Whenever I heard the name Arnie, I thought of a gangster in the book and movie *Little Caesar*. This particular Arnie was not a tough guy by any stretch of the imagination. He was short and skinny, had bulging eyes that seemed magnified by thick glasses and an Adam's apple that extended out almost as far as his chin, which wasn't far at all. DePaolo was not the sort of man you'd expect to find in a union hall. He was a bookkeeper, of course, so there was no reason to expect him to look like a tire builder.

As usual, Jack Eddy was a far cry from being diplomatic in his approach. After introducing himself without bothering to do the same for me he said, "So all the money comes to you, right?"

"Well, uh, it does after Mr. Bicanic receives it. What I, uh, mean is, it doesn't come to me directly. It ends up with me . . . uh, what I mean is—"

"I get the picture. So, who all gets to look at your books?"

"Uh, nobody. Well, that is, everybody. The union officers, I mean. They, uh, can, but hardly any of them bother. I read a report at the meetings so they, uh, know where things stand. I mean, uh, financially."

"How about Red Spivey? Did he look at 'em?"

"I, uh, don't know. He's an officer, uh, I mean he *was* an officer but, well, uh, I can't say if—"

"Okay, pal, I understand. You keep the books, but beyond that, you don't know from nothin', right?"

"Well, uh, I . . ." but Jack was already halfway to the door. I nodded at the ill-at-ease little man and followed along behind.

When we were back in the car, I said, "So what do you think? Did you learn anything?"

"The same thing you did, friend. Mike Bicanic has first crack at the dough, and then he passes it on to that pathetic excuse for a man who keeps the books."

“There you go, Jack, making another snap judgment about a man after talking to him for two minutes. As far as I can see, we didn’t learn much of anything. A lot of people could have taken a look at DePaolo’s books, and there’s not much reason to think any of this was connected to Spivey’s murder.”

“Not much reason? There’s *every* reason. The killer took that tin box with him when he left so no one would make the connection. Even you should be able to see that.”

“Maybe you’re right. It does seem funny, him spending so much time going over those papers and then having the box they were in disappear after he was killed. One thing, though, there’s no way to know just when it did disappear. For that matter, maybe he put it somewhere else, and it’ll turn up one of these days.”

“It won’t happen.”

“Another thing, Jack. Esther Spivey isn’t in the clear. She could have disposed of the box herself.”

“Then why tell us about it?”

“Yeah, there is that, but . . . oh, the hell with it.”

When Jack Eddy got home just before supper that evening, I could tell he was excited about something. Before he could say what it was, Mrs. Bauer called us to the table, and she brooked no delay when the food was ready. I was disappointed, though, to find she had prepared liver and onions. I kept my mouth shut but agreed with Artie when he said, “How can anybody eat this stuff? I’d just as soon eat worms or maggots.”

Miss Ferrabee gagged; Mabel Klosterman turned pale. Artie’s mother cried, “That’s enough, young man! Leave the table, and go to your room!”

“Aw, Ma—”

“Move!” shouted Bus Bauer, and Artie moved.

Jack Eddy covered his mouth with his napkin and pretended to be choking to hide his laughter. Artie’s older brother, Paul, got up and said, “I’m going to my room, too.” I was tempted to join the parade but was thankful I hadn’t when Mrs. Bauer brought out cherry cobbler for dessert. With two chairs vacant at the table, I was able to have seconds.

The temperature had dropped steadily during the afternoon so it was too cool to sit on the porch, but Jack Eddy pushed me out the door and toward the swing. Before I could utter a protest, he said, “I think I’ve got it figured, buddy. It’s too late now, so we’ll have to wait until morning to go back to the union hall.”

“I work in the morning, Jack, remember? Exactly what have you figured out?”

“It had to have been Nick Bicanic. He took in money and then held on to some of it instead of handing it over to that wimpy little guy. Spivey figured it out and confronted him, so Bicanic went to the house and knocked him off.”



"That's guesswork on your part. You haven't figured out anything that wasn't as plain as the nose on your face. You haven't got a shred of evidence to back you up, and one of these days going off half-cocked will get you in big trouble. Not me, though. I want no part of it."

"Suppose I told you Bicanic just bought a big new house on West Hill?"

"So what? Lots of people buy houses."

"I'm talking a fifteen thousand dollar house, sport. Where would a guy like Bicanic come up with dough like that unless he had his hand in the union's till?"

"I don't know, but you can count on one thing: I won't be there when you ask him."

I was surprised the next day when Jack Eddy didn't come charging in to the newsroom right after deadline with some scheme he'd concocted to get me to go along with him when he talked to Bicanic. When I still hadn't heard from him by the time I finished my afternoon rounds, I walked down the hill from Central Police Station to Main Street and on north to the Metropolitan Building. After getting off the elevator on the fifth floor and saying hello to the new Wellington receptionist, a swell looking girl I could have gone for, I went down the hall to Jack's private office and said, "So how'd it go?"

He looked up from the stack of papers on his desk, ran his fingers through what was left of his sandy brown hair, and said, "How'd what go?"

"Come off it, Jack. Your showdown with Bicanic."

"There wasn't one, friend. I made a few inquiries this morning and found out he married money. His old lady paid for the house. Cash on the barrelhead."

I grinned at that. "So you're back at the starting gate, right?"

"Not at all. I made a few other inquiries."

"And?"

"Arnie DePaolo has a wife and kid, a daughter about ten. She had something wrong, I forget what, and had an expensive operation at Children's Hospital a couple of months ago." An unpleasant leer came over his face. "Also paid for in cash."

"Maybe he married money, too."

"Not a chance. He lives in a dump out on Miles Street and drives an old clunker, a Wills-St. Clair ten years old or better."

"That was a make of car? Never heard of it."

"There's a lot you've never heard of, buddy. Sure it was a car. A big one built like an army tank, but you're getting away from the subject, which is a habit of yours."

"That's your opinion. So what're you going to do now, confront DePaolo?"

"Right. I'd rather talk to him at home instead of at the union hall, so we'll go by his place tonight after supper."



"Now look, Jack, I've told you I want no part of this."

"I figured you'd want to be in on the kill. Want me to call Tom Kennedy at the *Beacon Journal*?"

"That's it, isn't it? Publicity, that's all you really care about, isn't it, Jack? Admit it."

"Sure, I'll admit it's important, but that's not all I care about, sport. So do I call Kennedy or not?"

I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying the things I really wanted to say. I was angry, as angry as I'd ever been in my life, but I had no choice other than to say, "Okay, I'll go along," before storming out and slamming the door behind me. I would never know whether or not he had been serious about calling Tom Kennedy. I couldn't take the chance, knowing that if Jack's latest brainstorm amounted to anything and the *Beacon Journal* was first with the story I'd be in big trouble with Ben Goldsmith.

DePaolo's house on Miles Street was like others in the neighborhood, a modest but well-maintained working-class home with a neatly kept yard. More than an hour of daylight remained when Jack pulled his Auburn to the curb, but dark clouds were low in the sky and moving swiftly eastward. Thunder rumbled behind them, a sound that in recent months had made me think of war, of the Japanese invading China, of Hitler and his goose-stepping Germans marching into one country after another. The prospect of having to don a uniform and pick up a rifle held no appeal yet seemed more likely with every passing day.

As bad luck would have it, DePaolo's little girl answered Jack's pounding on the door. She was a pretty girl about Artie's age, eleven or twelve, with dark hair, a shy smile, and a gracious manner as she asked us to step inside while "I go get Daddy."

"I hate this, Jack," I said. "If you're right, it'll break her heart."

"That's the way the cookie crumbles, friend."

"You know something, Jack? You're a coldhearted bastard. Don't you have any feeling at all for a kid like that? Doesn't trying to tear her life apart bother you even a little?"

"Look, ace, if I'm right it will prevent tearing Andy Butler's life apart, and *his* family's life, so don't put on your pious, sanctimonious act for me."

He was right, of course. But that didn't make thinking about the little girl any easier. She was cured of whatever her problem had been and was happy now, content with her small role in life and the pleasant home her father had provided. Jack Eddy had to do what he did, it was his job, but at times having to witness it could be gut-wrenching.

DePaolo had been working at something in the basement and was wiping his hands on a rag as he came toward us along a hallway, a stunned expression on his face when he saw who his visitors were. "Mr. Eddy, what, uh, is it? Is something wrong?"

With his customary tact Jack replied, "Yeah, DePaolo, plenty's wrong.



We know the story, so why don't you make it easy for everyone and fill in the details."

The man had turned pale, and perspiration glistened on his forehead as he said, "I have, uh, no idea what you're talking about."

"Cut it out, DePaolo. Just come clean, get it off your chest. For starters, how much did you steal from the union?"

He slumped down in a chair, head droopy low. "I didn't steal, I borrowed. I've been paying a little back every week. What would you have done if your little girl had to have an operation to save her life?" He looked up defiantly and had suddenly regained his confidence, had lost his stammer and his need to break every sentence with an uh.

Jack nodded, turning sympathetic. Not really; it was merely part of his routine.

"I understand, DePaolo. Then, when Red Spivey discovered what was going on, you had no choice but to silence him, right?"

"Found out? Silence him? There was nothing for him to find out. I mean nothing that he *could* have found out. There was nothing on paper, nothing at all."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I can't control what you believe, but it's the truth. Bicanic gave me ten thousand in cash at the same time a number of other big contributions came in. I just held it out, paid for the operation, and then put back what was left and entered it on the books. As I said, I've been paying the rest back as fast as I can. I had no more to do with Red's death than you did."

I believed him and could see that Jack was wavering himself. Then he surprised me by saying, "Okay, I'm beginning to think you're telling the truth."

"Are you going to report what happened to Mr. Bicanic?"

"Not unless something new turns up. It's no affair of mine."

When Jack had driven to the end of the block and turned onto Ackley Street, I said, "You have no idea what's going on, do you? All you're doing is going from one possible suspect to another, hoping that sooner or later, you'll get lucky. You're a detective in name, a player of hunches in reality."

I expected him to snap my head off, but he didn't answer. Instead of going home he pulled into the lot behind the Lenox Cafe, opened the door on his side, and walked toward the entrance. I followed, of course, thinking I had finally gotten through to him, had really hurt him.

We drank from bottles of Burkhardt's beer in silence for several minutes; then he turned to me and said, "You're right, buddy. Come to think of it, you are a lot of times, and maybe I don't give you enough credit."

I was taken aback. This was not the Jack Eddy I had come to know, so I was at a loss for words. But the lapse was only momentary, and his supreme confidence came rushing back.

"I know where I went wrong, friend. I took someone's word for some-

thing, and it sent me off on a wrong track. Come to think of it, you played a part in it yourself."

"That's it, blame me for your wrong guesses."

"I'm not blaming you, just said you fell for the same line and it threw me. I should have known better."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what you're talking about?"

He gulped down the last of his beer. "Polish off that brew, and I'll let you in on the kill."

As he stood up to leave, I said, "Not again, Jack. I've had all I can take for one night."

I could just as well have been talking to my empty bottle because when we were back in the car he drove down the street to the Spivey house. Esther came to the door with an expectant look. "Have you learned something? Is Andy going to be set free?"

"Yes to both questions," Jack said when we were seated in the living room. "How far were you going to go with it, Esther? You weren't going to let them ship him down to Columbus, were you?"

She looked shocked, but it could've been an act.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Come on, kiddo, let's quit playing games. Your dad wasn't studying union records; there wasn't any tin box. You did a good job, really had me looking in all the wrong places, and we might have nailed an innocent man to the cross. You wouldn't have wanted that, Esther. Maybe you thought you wouldn't care as long as Andy was free, but you would have. It would have haunted you the rest of your life, so now let's get it over with. They'll go easy on you, you know that. You'll get plenty of sympathy for finally having more than you could take from an abusive father. Your mother couldn't stand any more of it and left, but you stuck it out because you were in love and wouldn't leave town. How many times did your old man beat you, how often did he slap you around?"

She buried her face in her hands and broke down completely, sobbing and gasping for air. It was all but unintelligible when she murmured, "I never thought they'd arrest Andy. I'm sorry, so sorry."

Jack went over and sat down beside her on the couch, putting his arm around her shoulders. "You picked up the gun as soon as Andy left, didn't you?"

She nodded, and then they sat quietly for a moment before Jack said, "Who can blame you? They'll go easy on you, kid, you'll see."

From beginning to end everything about the case was disturbing, with one exception. Seeing Ed Mayhew scowl and then turn away when we ran into each other at Central Police Station the next morning was gratifying. I added to his discomfort by loudly saying, "Good morning, Ed." He didn't answer, of course. It would have spoiled it if he had.

Jack Eddy was in a somber mood when I stopped by his office in the



afternoon. He was shuffling papers around on his desk until he saw me in the doorway, then he leaned back in his chair, chewed on a pencil for a second or two, tossed it aside, and said, "Got a cigarette, buddy?"

I took a crumpled pack of Spuds from my shirt pocket and tossed them on his desk. "Have you ever thought of buying a pack of your own, Jack?"

He lit a Spud, ignoring the question, blew a smoke ring in my direction, and said, "I hate these menthol fags. Why don't you smoke the regular kind?"

"Because hardly anyone but you bums these off me, that's why. When I carried Old Golds, I got to smoke half a pack and the moochers got the rest."

Jack grinned and said, "Cheapskate." He picked up a pile of assignment sheets, threw them down again with a look of disgust, saying, "Dull stuff, friend. Boring. Nothing coming in but insurance jobs, things like that."

"I'd think you'd be glad for something dull and boring for a change."

He motioned with his head toward a Philco table model radio on a file cabinet. "It's not just that, old friend. I was listening to the news before you got here. That Hitler bird is determined to have a war. If not over this current mess in Czechoslovakia, then the next thing that comes along. We'll be in it, buddy. You told me that once, and I said you were crazy. Now I'm a believer. It's going to happen, and before it's over, we'll be in it. You and I'll be in it right up to our necks."

"I hope you're wrong."

"Don't place any bets on it. You know what's the worst thing about war?"

"Everything, but I've an idea you have something specific in mind."

"Right. The worst thing about war is that they hand you a gun and tell you to go kill people. Not some guys you hate and know deserve it, but people you've never seen before. If you're good at it, they'll give you a medal. Then when you're home again the rules change, and if you kill some really rotten bastard, they'll throw you in prison or strap you into the chair."

"You're thinking about the Spivey case again, aren't you?"

"Right again. Any guy who beats on women deserves to be shot. There's no excuse for it, none at all."

"Well, Esther did the job."

"And where will she end up? Prison, and some people call it justice. So where were those people when Red was dishing out his brand of justice with his fists?"

"Don't look to me for any answers, Jack."

"Everything about that Spivey business was rotten. One guy loves his daughter so much that he turned thief for her, the other guy slapped his around and had no regard for her at all, so he ends up dead. Got what was coming to him, thinking he could handle every situation by beating on someone."



"Are you going to do anything about DePaolo?"

"Turn him in, you mean? Why should I? It's none of my business unless the union hires the agency to find where its money's going, and that's not going to happen."

"Good. I'd hate to see him in trouble."

"No, you wouldn't. You'd hate to see his little girl unhappy. The problem with you is you're too sentimental when it comes to girls, little or otherwise. I'd think your job would have toughened you up a little."

"If that means not caring about kids, I don't want to be tough."

"You need to get married and have a bunch of your own."

That was enough for me. When I reached the door, I said, "Maybe that's what you need, Jack. You might turn halfway human."

Sue Baney and I took in a movie that evening. Afterwards we stopped at Kesselring's on Triplett Boulevard for ice cream, a sundae for her, a banana split for me. While we were eating, I said, "Jack Eddy thinks I should get married and have a bunch of kids."

Sue choked on her ice cream, wiped her mouth and dried her eyes, then said, "I hope that's not a proposal. If it is, it qualifies as the world's worst."

I could feel my face turning red. "Don't get me wrong, Sue. I just meant that's what Jack said."

"Why did he say it?"

"He thinks I'm too soft on kids so I should have some of my own." A thought leaped to mind, and I laughed. "If I ever did, with my luck they'd probably turn out to be like Artie Bauer."

That made Sue laugh. "And I suppose you wouldn't like that? Be honest, Bram, you think the world of that brat."

"That's not true. Well, maybe he's okay."

On that note, I drove Sue to her apartment and then went on home by way of Market Street. Along the way I was wondering how many years Esther Spivey would have to serve in the prison for women at Marysville. Not too many, I hoped. Would Andy Butler be waiting for her when she got out? Who could know?

Aside from a scuffle outside a tavern, all was quiet on Market Street until I passed Goodyear's Plant One and could hear the hum of machinery. It was satisfying to find it that way. It was a pleasant May evening, life was back to normal, all was well with my world again.

Knowing Who You Might Have Been



M. K. Moulton

I take the weight of the rifle with my left hand, steady it with my right, rest my finger on the trigger guard and wait. I'm shaking inside.

"Fire!"

Actually, he says, "Esh!"

I'm shocked at the noise even with the fuzzy earmuffs they gave

us. And I wasn't ready for the punch in the shoulder.

Twelve cartridges in the magazine. I take my time. Along the line there are nine of us, some are whacking them off one after another. Fast. Like a computer game.

I slide my eyes sideways to my right where Yafit is standing like

the instructor told us. Feet to the side, body turned forward to face the target. Knees loose. She's taking her time, too. I have the feeling that her eyes just slid away from seeing what I'm doing. Yafit means Little Beauty. It's not such an unusual name in Hebrew. Yafit is very competitive. Anything I can do she can do better. She thinks. That's why she picked Civil Guard for her senior year community service. Because I did. And she'll win the Best Volunteer award, not me. She thinks.

I squeeze off my next shot and then, very slowly, the next ten. Sort of alternating with her shots. We're the last two still shooting. I know the others are watching us and making smart remarks. They know we hate each other.

The walk across the fifty meters to the line of targets is the longest I ever experienced. At first I'm eager, excited. Then I'm hating every step and dreading getting close enough to see the marks on my target. Or that there won't be any.

The soldier in charge moves from one target to the next. I'm seventh. He doesn't say anything. Nothing. Not even, *Not bad for the first time*. Or, *Pretty good*. Or, *Lousy*. Nothing. He makes a black circle around each hole with his magic marker and counts them out loud, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine," so I can see if he missed any. So Yafit can hear I got only nine out of twelve on the target.

He draws a big circle around six of my nine bunched together. "Next time, aim a little lower."

I want to ask him when the next

time will be. I know it's at least a month, but that's too long. I want a chance to practice more. I want to ask him if I can come sooner, but he's already moved away. To Yafit.

"... four, five, six, seven, eight, nine."

We're standing around trying to look casual, the six of us who got high enough scores on the target range. I know they're as excited as I am.

The weapons are locked in a metal rack bolted to the wall. We're trying to be cool, but we can't keep our eyes off them.

"Everyone finished reading the rules?" A young guy. Neat blue uniform. Home-front patch on his shoulder, three stripes on his sleeve. Silver name tag on his chest: NIR. He crosses to the desk and sits. "Those rules are the law. The Ten Commandments for you." He nods at Yafit, I suppose because she's the only girl there. Maybe he wants to get rid of her. "What's the most important rule?"

"Number Ten," she says. "The last one."

I turn to look at her. Everyone does. Yafit's eyes are narrow and very dark. She wears her hair straight down at the sides. "The one that says we don't load the weapon unless our commander tells us to and we don't fire unless there is a clear threat to our life or the life of somebody else and our commander tells us to fire."

That's Yafit. She could have recited all ten rules standing on her head.

Nir looks at her for a long time.

She's looking back at him with those narrow, dark eyes. Finally he nods. "Any questions?"

If you know Israeli sixteen-year-olds, you know everyone had to have something to say. Most of it boiled down to "What if we see a reason to load and maybe fire and our commander doesn't see it or doesn't agree?"

Typical.

Nir's expression doesn't change. He's got pale, bumpy skin that looks a little irritated. Maybe from shaving. And reddish hair.

"If you think that could possibly happen, you don't belong here, so you can leave now." Then he waits. No one moves. No one says anything.

The Civil Guard office is in the police station. In a small town like Kiryat Tivon it's a pretty small station, and it's a pretty small office. The office is filled with metal filing cabinets. Locked. Gunracks. Locked. Floor to ceiling shelves of thick binders. Nir's desk.

It's gotten so quiet in here I notice there's a lot of noise in the outer office. Telephones ringing and people shouting and rushing around while the six of us stand here sort of holding our breath.

At his desk Nir folds his hands on a little stack of papers. Neat posture. Waiting. He's got time.

We've all passed our security check, and I know when we sign those papers we get an I.D. card that gives us temporary police powers, the right to carry the weapon issued to us, full medical insurance, and the legal obligation to obey the rules. The Ten Commandments.

"Any more questions?"

We shake our heads.

We all sign, and he counts us off by twos.

"Okay. You two. The *nyedet* is outside."

Just because Yafit happened to be standing next to me I get stuck with her.

A *nyedet* is a police patrol van. The chance to ride in one almost makes up for having to put up with Yafit. There are three of them parked along the curb. We head for the one with its lights on. The driver is already behind the wheel. There's another man next to him. Neither in uniform. Volunteers. Like us.

Between them they fill the front seat. Yafit and I climb onto the bench seat behind them. Try to climb in. Our weapons, slung from our shoulders, slam against the door frame. Finally we unsling them and lay them on the floor. Yafit bumps her head getting in. I'm embarrassed to be teamed with a girl. They haven't said a word to us.

The driver lifts a microphone from a hook on the dashboard. "*Nyedet* 660 *aleph*. Four volunteers. On our way."

Kiryat Tivon sits high among the Galilee hills. We head down in the direction of Haifa, traveling fast, headlights slicing the highway. I can see the reflection of the blue roof lights flashing past the scrub along the edge of the road. I glance over at Yafit. Our eyes meet, and we grin. We're both excited.

"...said five got in? What've they got guarding the borders? Swiss cheese?"

All the way down the mountain the two in the front seat are talking. Not to us.

"... had a commander in '56 in Sinai didn't know up from down on the map. The rest of us, the simple soldiers, had to ..."

In Israel everyone was in the army, so everyone knows how to run a war better than the generals. Not that this is a war. It's just some terrorist action.

"Don't tell me about Sinai in '56. We ..."

Sitting there next to each other, filling the whole front seat between them, they're comfortable in their complaints. It's a game Israelis play. Criticizing so they can know who they are. I mostly tune it out. When we were living in the States for my dad's sabbatical, there was crime in the streets and kids shooting each other in school and people were always asking me if it wasn't scary to live in a dangerous country like Israel. It made me want to laugh. Maybe if I'd been born in the States I'd have thought the dangers there are less scary than the dangers here.

"... crazy if they think they'll catch them with roadblocks."

"So go explain to them how infiltrators know shortcuts. In '67 on the northern border every soldier knew ..."

I look over at Yafit, wishing she were someone I could share something with. Something more important than just riding in a *nyedet*.

"... miss some at the roadblocks, they think they can pick 'em off a bus, easy like picking a flea off a dog's belly."

"What can you do. They give the orders."

In less than twenty minutes we're at Checkpost, the major intersection connecting Haifa with the towns and villages to the east and north. Towns like Nazareth, Tiberius, Kiryat Shmona, and lots of kibbutzim, moshavim, and Arab villages. And the borders with Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

The driver pulls over to the curb and gets out. Now I can see he's really old and sort of fat. The other one moves over behind the wheel and turns to glance at us. "*Nu?*" Yafit and I get out, hauling our weapons. "I'll come to get you at ten," he calls to our driver and is gone.

Yafit and I sling our weapons and stand near where our driver is talking to a man in uniform. Border police. The ones mainly responsible for terrorists who try to infiltrate across the borders.

"That's what you brought?"

Meaning us. Like we're not standing right there.

The driver shrugs. "That's what they gave us. The regulars are in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the alert." He looks over at us, and I recognize the look. He's humiliated to be teamed with kids. By his age he's too old for the army, and now he's just a Civil Guard volunteer and stuck with a couple of stupid kids. Like I feel about being stuck with a girl. For a minute I don't feel so bad about her.

"We've got an alert here, too," the border policeman says to no one in particular. He shakes his head like

he's been through this kind of stupidity before. Except he would have said "this kind of crap" or the Hebrew or Arabic equivalent. "You see that yellow sign up there on the lightpole?" He's talking to Yafit and me.

We both nod. It's a normal bus stop sign.

"Every bus coming toward Haifa will stop here. You . . ." he nods at me. He's not much taller than I am but broader. Thick. I can see the muscles in his arms and shoulders right through his uniform. The silver nameplate on his shirt says WALID. "You stand in front of the bus when it stops, write down the number and the rest of this. See: Direction. Destination. Time. Date." He hands me a paper form attached to a clipboard. "Then you don't take your eyes off Menachem." Menachem is the one who drove our *nyedet*. "Menachem is going to be standing next to the bus driver. If he turns and waves at you, you get out of here fast, you understand? And take your girlfriend with you."

Yafit's got her mouth open to tell him a few things, but he's telling her to "stand on the side and, every bus that comes, you check the baggage compartment. If it's locked, okay. You tell your friend, and he marks it on the paper. If it's not locked, you open it and flash your light inside." He hands her a six-battery flashlight. "All around inside, and if you see anything—" he widens his eyes at her—"anything in there, you *don't touch it*. You come to the front near your friend here and flash your light to where

Menachem is standing inside next to the bus driver. Then you and your friend get out of the way. Understood?"

She nods.

Then we wait for a bus. There are plenty of them coming from the other direction across the road, stopping to take on passengers and then whizzing past. Away from us. Full of people. Nobody is over there checking them.

At last a bus pulls up on our side. I stand in front of it feeling gigantic, writing down the numbers and the other information. Yafit tugs at the handles of the baggage compartment. Locked. Menachem is inside, standing next to the driver. The border policeman is strolling down the aisle looking at each passenger. Then he exits from the center door. The whole thing takes about three minutes.

It was a little after five P.M. when we got here, but it's dark already because it's winter. After the bus leaves, we stand around under the streetlights watching the buses across the road. People going home from work, from shopping. Loaded with packages.

There are stores and offices on our side, mostly still open, neon lights flashing, big plate glass windows with displays. It's kind of cheerful. We're all sort of greenish under the neon lights. Sony, Mitsubishi, a shoestore, dresses. The display windows are not that interesting after the first half hour. People are still shopping. No one pays any attention to us.

There are always kiosks near bus stops. The smell of felefa sizzling in

hot fat makes me hungry. I don't think it would look right to be eating a felel while we're supposed to be guarding. I watch people duck their heads to bite, see them strolling away, chewing.

Yafit, standing next to me, shifts her weapon to ease the weight on her shoulder. All volunteers have to be armed. The ones who haven't qualified for handguns are issued an M1.

An M1 semi-automatic rifle is long and slender with a polished wooden stock. Beautiful but heavy. World War II U.S. Army surplus. Menachem and the border policeman have handguns in canvas holsters on their belts.

Between the smell of the felel and the feel of the gun on my shoulder and all those buses across the road, I want to *do* something.

"Excuse me," I say to Menachem. I feel like a kindergarten kid asking permission to go to the bathroom. "Yafit and I could go across the road and we could . . ."

The look on Menachem's face freezes the words in my mouth. He doesn't even glance at me. "Walid is the commander of this operation. Talk to him." The way he says "commander" makes it sound like an insult. He turns and walks away to lean against one of the buildings.

The border policeman is standing near the bus stop sign practically next to us. I look over at him, really embarrassed. There's no way he couldn't have heard what Menachem said. And the tone of his voice. Really nasty. In the awful silence after Menachem walks away, I guess I'm sort of paralyzed.

"Would you explain it to us?" Nothing paralyzes Yafit. She plants herself in front of Walid. "Why can't we go across the road and check the buses over there?"

At first I think he's not going to answer her. Maybe he was deciding. Then he sort of squints his eyes at her like he's getting a good look at her for the first time. "Because the buses on this side come from the direction of the Palestinian territories and the borders and the villages. If we have trouble, that's where it will come from. Over there —" he motions to the buses across the road — "they're coming directly from Haifa. That's not where the trouble comes from, and we'd need a lot more people than we've got if we wanted to check them because it takes four people at least to check a bus."

I can hear the Arabic in his Hebrew. There's more throat in Arabic. The Druze speak Arabic, but they're not Muslims like most Israeli Arabs and the Druze swore allegiance to the state when it was founded. Israeli Arabs don't go into the police or the army. Israeli Druze do. A lot of them join the border police after the army.

"Why four?"

That's Yafit. Doesn't give up.

"Why do we need Menachem to stand next to the driver?" Walid asks her.

"So the driver won't . . ."

"What? Run away with us?" It's not a question, and Walid doesn't wait for an answer. "Because Menachem is beck-ap."

He says the English words with an Arabic-Hebrew accent. It's really funny, but I don't laugh.

"I'm walking through the bus looking at faces. Let's say there's a face I don't like. What do I do?"

"Ask him for his I.D.," I say before Yafit can hog this whole conversation.

Walid nods. "But let's say he doesn't want to show me his I.D. or he just doesn't like me to look at his face? Then what?" Neither Yafit nor I know the "then what?"

"That man can see Menachem is standing in front of the bus with his police radio in one hand and the other hand maybe on his belt near his weapon. Is that man going to make me any trouble to show me his I.D. or tell me he forgot it, lost it, left it at home, or . . ."

"What if he's got a button?" She tries to say it like it's an ordinary question. She means a detonator connected to explosives strapped to his body.

Walid looks at her for a long time before he says, "They're not standing in line to commit suicide, and if it's the one we're looking for, he won't push his button on one of these buses, where there aren't many people. He'll get off the bus and go into a big store. Or a restaurant. We think he wants to get to Haifa."

All this time Menachem's been standing away from us, leaning against a building with his arms folded. People are passing back and forth on the sidewalk, hanging on to their kids, talking, looking in the display windows. It's a busy street. Seeing him over there, I feel sorry for him. Like a dead tree in a forest.

I go over and stand next to him. Then Yafit comes. Then Walid. Not

too close. Maybe he's embarrassed to be teamed with an old man and a couple of kids.

People passing don't pay attention to us. A couple of teenagers with rifles slung from their shoulders, an old man with a pistol on his belt and a border policeman are not such an unusual sight even when one of the teenagers is a girl.

I'm half expecting Menachem to move away from us, but he doesn't. Instead he finds a more comfortable place to lean his back against the building and says to no one in particular, "There are other ways to get into Haifa from the direction of the territories without passing this point. I myself know of at least five paths and a couple of unpaved roads that would bring someone through Galilee and up the flank of that hill over there," indicating the Carmel mountain. "Right into Vadi Niss Nass." He turns his head to look directly at Walid. "You know Vadi Niss Nass?"

Walid nods. "Yes."

Everybody knows Vadi Niss Nass. It's a large Israeli Arab neighborhood in Haifa. It used to be popular with tourists. Lately there's been what the police call "unrest," so tourists mostly stay away.

"If I know about those paths and back roads, so do others," Menachem says. His voice is low and sort of rough, like the next thing out of his mouth is going to be awful. "Every Arab in the area knows how to get into Haifa that way. Maybe somebody has a reason for keeping us here, playing games with empty buses. Or maybe it's just the usual army bureaucratic screwup."

The two of them are standing there glaring at each other. Or rather, Menachem is glaring. Walid's eyes are just hard and steady. "I'm not worried about why the ones directing this operation sent me here and what else they know. This is the part I'm responsible for." His face sort of closes. He's said everything he's going to say.

After that we just stand around not looking at each other until Yafit says, "I know about those paths, too. When I was in Scouts, we hiked all through Galilee and the Carmel hills right into Haifa." She turns to me. "You did, too, didn't you?"

I could kill her. Does she think we're going to go up there and start searching the paths?

"I could call somebody. I've got a friend I know from Scouts. He could come and . . ."

Both Menachem and Walid turn their heads to look at her. For the first time I see what could almost be amusement in Menachem's eyes, but he doesn't say anything.

"The one whose face I know has a special reason to come to Haifa," Walid says. "It's where his brother was killed. They know he crossed into Israel. They know his way of operating—who taught him—and that he can't walk a lot because of an injured leg. He won't use those paths. They know he pledged to be a martyr to avenge his brother and to be with him at Allah's side." Walid's voice is quiet, neutral, but I get a whiff of what he thinks about martyrs. The Druze believe that every person's destiny is set at birth and nobody can decide when he's going to go sit next to Allah.

Even Yafit can't think of anything to say after that, so we're all just standing around not looking at each other again.

The sidewalk is pretty full by now. People strolling, looking in the shops. Parents hanging onto little kids. People bump into us, standing together in front of the display windows. Sometimes they look annoyed, like don't we have anything better to do than stand around. But a lot of people say, "*Kol ha kavod v'toda l'chem*," which comes out something like "All honor and thanks to all of you." In Hebrew it sounds nicer. It makes me feel better about standing there feeling the tension between Walid and Menachem.

It's a relief when a bus comes. Like all the rest on our side of the road, there aren't many people in it. They're mostly scattered toward the back, with a few near the center door.

Standing in front of the bus looking up at Menachem and the driver and Walid, I'm feeling like a veteran. Experienced. Trying to look a little bored. I eye the passengers like I know what I'm looking for. I feel like I do. I've watched Walid all evening.

Yafit's next to me. "Locked," she says, making her voice sound like nothing special.

We're not really paying much attention to the bus. Without really looking, I know Menachem is there, standing next to the driver, and Walid is strolling down the aisle.

With all the lights on in there, it's like we're watching TV with the sound turned off. Walid says some-

thing to a man sitting near the center door—I see his lips move. The guy doesn't answer, just sits there staring straight ahead. Across the aisle and one row back, another man reaches inside his jacket. Then it's like a slow-motion film. Walid's still talking and the guy's still sitting there staring straight ahead. The man behind him gets to his feet. I think I see the knife in his hand before I can believe what I'm seeing. Yafit's got hold of my arm in an iron grip. She sees it, too.

Right through the glass I can hear Menachem shouting. Then everything happens at once. Fast. The man behind Walid makes a neat swoop with his knife. It goes into Walid's back. People in the bus are screaming. I see the muzzle flash from Menachem's gun. I see the man with the knife fall between the seats. I don't see Walid.

The center door is open. It's always open when Walid and Menachem are inside. I see a man leaping from the center door. Insanely I think, oh good. There's Walid.

It's not Walid. It's the man Walid was talking to. Yafit and I are ten feet away. We throw ourselves at him. It should feel like I'm Superman leaping the tallest buildings, but I feel like Mary Poppins holding my rifle straight up like her umbrella.

Yafit and I slam into each other and into the man at the instant Menachem catapults out of the door, roaring like a hippopotamus. "Get out of the way!" And topples all of us to the ground with him on top.

Arms, legs, rifles, bodies are a

squirming pile on the ground. Menachem is still shouting. A lot of curses and "Get out of the way!" Something hard and sharp is jabbing me. I'm blind with terror. A knife! Menachem's weight on me presses me against it. I yank my body free, find my rifle, not a knife, and I'm eye to eye with the man on the ground beneath me. An instant. Long enough for our eyes to meet, to lock, to know that if I had grown up in his life and he in mine, we'd still be facing each other in a moment like this. Then he throws me off of him into Menachem, into Yafit, and he turns to run.

The instant of knowing who we might have been is gone. On my feet, my rifle in my hands, I slam the magazine in place, pull the lever, raise it to my shoulder, squint through the sight. I'm not thinking about any of it. It's what I'm doing. By this time the man is in the middle of the sidewalk. In the middle of all the people.

"You can't!" She's got her rifle by the barrel with both hands, ready to swing it like a club.

"You can't!" doesn't register. Rule Number Ten doesn't register. What registers is the people on the sidewalk screaming and running and grabbing their children and moving in and out of the little oval with the point in it at the end of the barrel of my gun. And that I only got nine out of twelve on the target and that this isn't target practice and that I can't get the man in my gunsight long enough to pull the trigger before he's gone again and other people are there.

Yafit isn't close enough to wallop

him. I'm afraid to fire. He's running, bumping into people, pushing them, knocking them down. Kids are crying. People are screaming. A few try to grab at him to stop him. He's fast, powerful, hitting out with his fists and his shoulders.

If he's got a button, why doesn't he use it!

Then I see where he's heading. There's a shopping center around the corner. Restaurants, a movie theater, bigger stores. Lots of people. More than here. If he's the one with the button, that's what he's aiming for.

I'm slamming into people, tripping over them, trying to get to him. So is Yafit.

"Get out of the way!" Menachem roars. He grabs Yafit's rifle and uses it like a scythe, cutting people down, clearing the way. The man turns, sees him, and for an instant they're standing there looking at each other. Then Menachem raises his arm and shoots him.

Blue, red. Red, blue. Lights flashing make me dizzy. Make me want to vomit, want to close my eyes, stick my fingers in my ears, block out the *wah yah wah yah* sirens up and down and howling horror that might have been on a busy shopping street with horror enough now, lying face up on the sidewalk, one leg bent, surrounded by people

no one near enough to spit, kick, maybe set off the explosives maybe strapped to his body maybe a booby trap. They stand back behind the police barrier ugly in triumph, restless, muttering.

The muttering gets louder, and people, moaning, press harder against the barriers when Walid's body, on a stretcher, is carried out and placed in the ambulance. The police link arms to hold them back. A hissing howl goes up when the second man, bundled in a plastic body bag, is hauled out. The ambulance team is heading for the body of the man on the sidewalk. The sappers have finished with him, removed the detonator, disarmed the explosives.

I feel Yafit's arm around my waist. "Come on," she says. "The *nyedet* is here to take us home."

I stand there seeing that man. That mourning martyr. That martyred brother. Watching the drawstrings of the plastic bag pulled closed. Knowing it could as well be me lying bloody on Haifa's grimy sidewalk and he standing, seeing the crowd melt now in silence. And he shrieking within himself: how many more brothers, sons, fathers, mothers with their babies. How many more martyrs. Mourners.

And feeling his own Yafit's arm around his waist. "Come on. The *nyedet* is here to take us home."

FICTION

DAILY DOUBLE CROSS

Dan A. Sproul

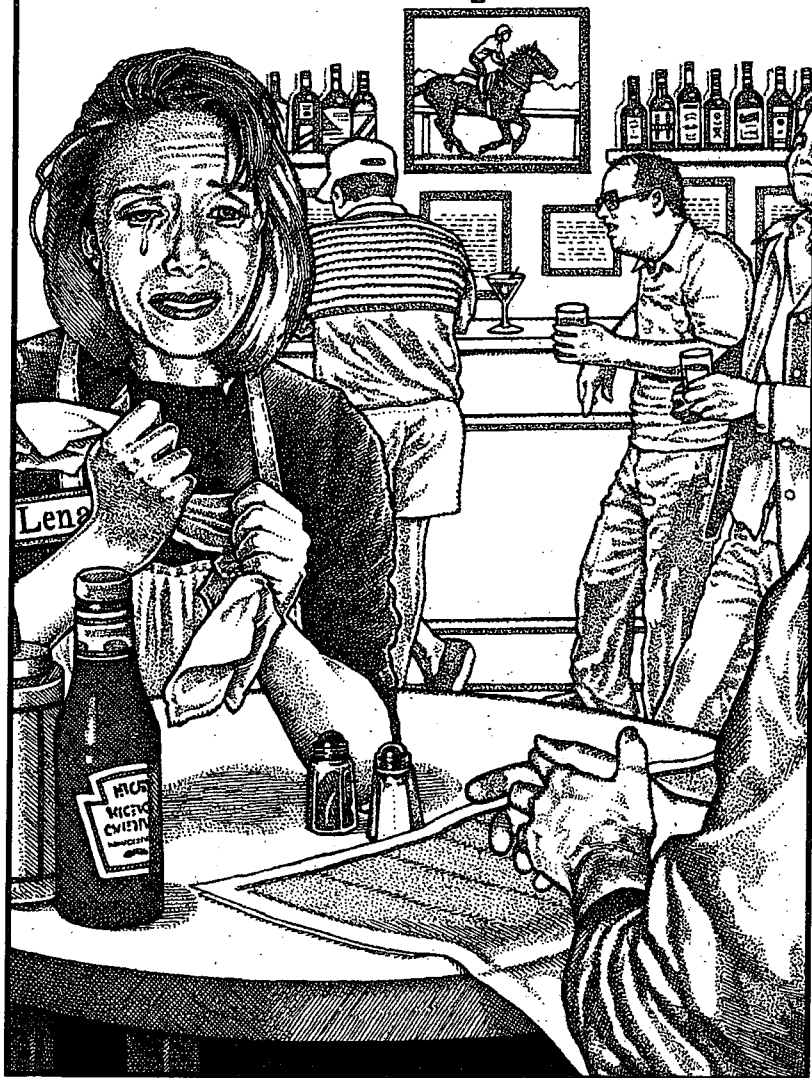


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/02

The Surfer Bar and Grill does not serve good food. The food is commonly insipid, is often hard to digest, and lacks variety. I eat there anyway. The Surfer is close, just around the corner from my place of business.

In fairness I should state for the record that the joint makes up for its lackluster menu by attracting an interesting clientele and entertaining employees. Yet to my knowledge, no documented, authentic, actual surfer has ever set foot in the place. The Surfer would more aptly fit into the category of sports bar. Admittedly, the bar was in the category long before the category was popularized.

People who frequent the Surfer Bar and Grill play the horses. Perhaps the word "play" is ill chosen. Let me say, the patrons of the Surfer Bar and Grill bet the horses. They do so frequently and with egregious zeal.

Which brings us to Lena. Lena was a waitress and sometime barmaid, long divorced from her fourth husband, Edgar. Childless and approaching that age when steadfast companionship is more valued than lust, the regulars frequenting the Surfer Bar were like her family—her companions.

I guess you could call it a custom, or maybe a habit. It was more or less a routine thing with Lena. She wasn't really a handicapper and knew next to nothing about selecting a horse to bet. But it was her way to sort of bond with the customers. Lena always bet a one nine double. That is, she would bet the daily double with the number one

horse in the first race coupled with the number nine horse in the second race. It was a two dollar bet. She had never hit one that anybody could remember. But she always sent the bet along with one of the regulars.

Which brings us back to me, Joe Standard. My one-man detective agency is just around the corner in the Sunbelt Realty Building. My office lacks size. It contains only a desk with a small filing cabinet in one corner, a cot for an occasional nap, a TV, two chairs, and a small bookcase. On the wall above the cot is my revered photograph of the invincible Seattle Slew drawing off to win the 1977 Preakness Stakes. Fortunately, there is little room for the appliances necessary to prepare meals, so I eat out a lot. And since I myself have been known to place a bet from time to time, the Surfer Bar was a natural place to dine and mingle with kindred spirits.

Lena was a longtime friend. She customarily reserved my booth for breakfast. I was reluctant to test the dinner menu at the Surfer. I usually had a late breakfast and skipped eating again until about seven in the evening. It was my belief that even the cooks at the Surfer couldn't screw up items like an omelette or cornflakes. This was a misplaced belief on occasion. My booth was secluded in a corner. It managed to separate me somewhat from the raucous nincompoops that littered the bar in midmorning, prior to first post. It also allowed the *Racing Form* to be spread out in its entirety.

Most of the patrons of the Surfer fell into two categories, winners and losers. The latter category, without question the most abundantly represented, could be further disseminated into the subheadings of Big Losers, Chronic Losers, and Poor Losers. A lot of the regulars fit all three groups. And none more so than Kipling.

Actually, his real name was Horace Kluperdorf or Kloperdink or something like that. He sold real estate sometimes. Sometimes he didn't. It was common knowledge that Lena and Kipling had something going and that Kipling would end up Lena's number five before too long. They called him Kipling because of his poems. He was fond of writing poems about the racetrack. Lena painstakingly framed these poetic creations and displayed each of them on the backbar wall. As with most of the Surfer Bar people, Kipling lived for post time. And it was to Kipling that Lena entrusted her daily double bet on most occasions.

On this Saturday morning, I slide into my booth and spread out the *Form* before me. A second-page headline caught my attention at once. I began to read:

CALDER PAYS OUT RECORD DAILY DOUBLE

Friday, at Calder Race Course, the combination of number one, Sleeping Sal, in the first race at odds of ninety-four to one, and number nine, Doblott, in the second race at one hundred and six to one produced a daily double

payoff of \$21,964.60. This payout is reported to be the highest daily double recorded at the Miami track since it opened in 1973. According to the Racing Secretary, it may be a Florida record. The parimutuel spokesman at Calder reports that there was only a single ticket sold. The largest daily double paid out in previous years . . .

At this point my attention was drawn from the page by Lena, who slid into the booth across from me. I hadn't yet had my coffee. That possibly explains why the full import of what I was reading did not set in at once. The appearance of Lena, however, jostled my synapses sufficiently, allowing me to grasp the big picture. Lena always bet a one-nine double. According to the *Form*, it had come in, and it paid more than twenty grand. I was about to offer my congratulations over her good fortune when I caught the bunch at the bar waving their arms at me and shaking their heads.

Lena spoke softly to me from across the table. "Joe, I need your help. I want to hire you. It's Kipling, I think something might have happened to him. He didn't show up at my house last night. He hasn't been home all night and he didn't show up at the realty office this morning."

"Hmm," I said. "When, ah, when did you see him last?"

"Yesterday morning," she said, tears welling in her eyes as she twisted a bar towel in her nervous hands.

"Did he carry your double bet to the track as usual?" I asked.

"Yes, but what's that got to do with it?"

The boys at the bar still tossed off an occasional headshake. "Oh, I don't know, a passing thought. Maybe nothing."

She slid a hundred dollar bill across the table. "Here's a hundred dollars. That's all I've got right now. Could you just see if you can find out what happened to him?"

"I can't take your money, Lena," I told her. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what happened when Dobblot, the number nine horse, hit the wire at a hundred and six to one. Kipling, who had never seen five hundred bucks in one pile, held over twenty grand in one hand. My guess was he was on the West Coast by now, sending it in with both hands at Hollywood Park.

Lena still had a curve to her hip and bulged in all the right places but she was fighting fifty, and twenty grand was a powerful wad of cash for a pollywog like Kipling. I had a little trouble making up my mind, but I didn't see the point in deceiving her further. She would surely find out. These bums were trying to spare her feelings, but it's the kind of secret that is impossible to keep. I reasoned that she'd hear the truth anyway before the day was out. I slid the *Form* around to her side of the booth.

"Maybe you should read this," I said, pointing to the Calder double article.

"Oh God!" she said finally, turning away. She pushed the paper

from her as if it were wrapped around a four-day-dead carp.

I shoved the C-note back across the table. Suddenly she turned back to face me. She used the bar rag to wipe her face and eyes savagely. "No!" she said angrily. "He wouldn't do that. You're wrong. He wouldn't steal the money." She picked up the C-note and placed it before me with considerable force. "You take this money, and you find out what happened."

I pushed the money back at her once more. "Keep the hundred. I'll look into it. But can I have breakfast first?" I was pretty well convinced that Kipling had fled with Lena's loot. But a cursory look-see wouldn't hurt.

Kipling was a bookish, fidgety little guy, thin and short with a bald spot creeping back from his forehead. I wasn't real chummy with him, so I wasn't up to speed on who he might associate with at the track. I never noticed him hanging out with anyone but Lena. It could be different at the track. Most horseplayers play in tandem. That is, they associate with one or more people when betting at the track. That isn't always true, but it's true for the most part. And the majority favor a certain section of the track to view the races and make their bets.

I had a big bet in the third race, older horses going a mile on the turf. I used the time before the race to question some of the players in the clubhouse, some of the sellers I knew, and a few of the workers in the cleanup crew. All I was able to establish was that Kipling probably

did his betting in the grandstand. Chances were good that he was a two dollar player, which figured. It was the middle of July. I could see little point in deserting the air-conditioned clubhouse to do I didn't know what in the sweltering grandstand.

In the third I bet a hundred on a dark bay four-year-old son of A. P. Indy at five to two. He broke on top, crossed over in front of the field from the eleven post, and won by seven easy lengths without taking a deep breath. The peabraind stewards quickly disqualified him for interference out of the gate when he crossed over. They placed him fifth. So now I knew how the rest of the day was going to go. I learned nothing of Kipling at the track and left in disgust after the fifth race.

A bizarre thought struck me on the drive back to my office. Suppose Kipling never even went to the track—maybe he didn't make Lena's bet. Maybe he took off because he couldn't face her. A lot of maybes. At the office I decided to make a call to Jimmy Cox, a personal friend and the head of Calder security. Whoever cashed the double ticket filled out a W2 for the tax people. Jimmy could tell me who that person was.

When I finally got Jimmy on the phone, he was in a hurry, about to leave on vacation. But he didn't have to look up anything. He told me up front, straight out. The ticket hadn't been cashed yet. This revelation destroyed my favored theory that Kipling had absconded with the money. The idea that perhaps

he never made the bet at all was growing stronger. Then I took it a little farther. Maybe he did make the bet. Would he cash the ticket or wouldn't he? It wasn't really his ticket—why should he pay the tax? But then why did he disappear? Too many ifs, maybes and what-ifs. I needed to find him.

I wheeled my '66 Mustang off the Palmetto Expressway and headed for the realty office where Kipling worked. I went in the back way off Northwest Thirty-sixth Street. Hope surged when I spotted a gray Plymouth K-car along with several other cars in the parking area of a dilapidated, abandoned gas station. I wasn't sure until I got a good look at the custom license plate. ISELL was emblazoned on the plate. It was Kipling's Plymouth. There was no mistaking that junker.

I pulled my Mustang in alongside the Plymouth and walked a hundred yards around the end of the block to Song of the South Realty.

"Yes, can I help you?" asked a couple of guys in unison, pouncing on me as I cleared the doorway. I tried to look past them to find Kipling, but they stayed in my face. "Are you interested in something in our new Clarion development..."

"I don't want to buy a house. I'm looking for Kipling."

"Shucks!" said one of the guys. He was the dumber looking one.

"Who?" said the other guy.

"Little, skinny, short, bald guy with horn-rimmed glasses," I elucidated. "Name's Kluperdink, or something like that."

"You mean Horace?" asked the dumber looking guy.

"Yeah, Horace," I said.

"He ain't been here since yesterday morning," the dumber looking one informed me.

"Then what the hell's his car doing parked out in back by the gas station?" I asked.

The dumber looking guy confirmed my appraisal of him by pointing out the following: "There's never any place to park in front unless you get here before eight o'clock."

The less dumb looking salesman had already wandered off sensing a no-sale.

So his car was at work, but Kipling wasn't. This deal was beginning to get seriously weird. I went back and checked the Plymouth out again. It was locked. Everything looked normal inside. I took the Mustang down the alley and spun back onto Northwest Thirty-sixth. If his car was at work without him, maybe he was home without his car. Chances were good he didn't leave town without the car. If he were going to do that, he'd have left the Plymouth in the airport parking lot. What was I saying—he wouldn't leave town without cashing the ticket. Nothing made any sense.

I knew where Kipling's apartment building was. Lena referred to the place as the Rat Trap Arms. The Regent Arms was an old, small, two story hotel made over into efficiency apartments. I didn't know which apartment. There was no longer a lobby, just a large lounging area with a community TV and,

to the right, a door with an APARTMENT MANAGER sign. I knocked.

The door opened about four inches. The woman was in a bathrobe. She was minus her false teeth. It gave her that universally recognized no-teeth mouth pucker. "Ain't got no vacancies," she gummed at me.

"I'm looking for Horace Klurpslinker or something like that. Little skinny guy, going bald . . ."

"He ain't here. Been gone since yesterday."

I jammed my foot in the closing door, pulled my fake I.D. with the tin shield, and flashed it in her face. "Mind if I have a look at his apartment? Just to make sure."

"Oh, I don't know," she sputtered. "Don't you need a search warrant?"

I pointed to the dilapidated stairway leading to the second floor. There were a couple of two by fours nailed to the banister and braced to the floor to hold it up. "Don't you need a building permit for the construction on that stairway?"

Everything inside of Kipling's apartment was worn thin. But clothes were in his closet and underwear in the dresser drawer. There was nothing to suggest abandonment of the place. A portable typewriter rested on the kitchen table with one of his poems popping up from the platen. The old woman manager, her chin nearly resting on my shoulder, read the poem along with me.

The Futurity

*He was a classy steed,
A stakes contender sure.*

*Conception and the seed
Guaranteed his breeding pure.*

*His parents were renowned,
To fail no one could see.
For fit he was and sound
For the Belmont Futurity.*

*Yes, he had been selected
The nominations done.
But once he was elected
He did not choose to run.*

H.K.

I pulled the poem from the typewriter, doubtful that it was a clue but thinking Lena would probably like to have it. "What's a futurity?" the old woman asked.

I explained to her that some breeding stallions have their foals nominated by the breeder for future high-priced races. If they display the class as a two-year-old and look like they are good enough, they are allowed into the futurity race, where the winner is guaranteed a very large purse. I added, "Some disappoint, like the one in the poem."

"You know Horace is one of my best people," the old woman volunteered. "He pays his rent on time. You think something might have happened to him?"

"He seems to have turned up missing," I told her. "He didn't say anything to you about taking a trip or going to visit his uncle uptown or something?"

"I didn't know he had an uncle."

"Probably doesn't. I was just —"

"He didn't say nothin' to me, but there was two guys here yesterday looking for him," she broke in.

"Two guys—when was that, exactly?"

She rubbed her puckered mouth. "I guess it was about three o'clock. I was on my way to the laundry room."

"They say what they wanted?"

"Wanted to find him," she said. "I told them he wasn't here. Told them where he worked."

"So what did these two guys look like, anyway?" I asked.

"They was fat," she spread out her hands to indicate the magnitude of their fatness. "This one guy, the really fat one, had a big wart on the underside of his eyelid. Had a couple of long white hairs curling up out of it. Appeared like they might poke him in the eye. The other guy had a mustache. Looked like he was eatin' a chipmunk. His hair was ratty and hung down to his shoulders like a hippie."

The old woman had a knack for descriptions. I made the two guys before she even got to the eyelid wart, which, by itself, left no doubt. The lesser fat man with the hair to his shoulders was Harold "Handy Hal" Blustrode. The owner of the eyelid wart was George Bogiea, better known among serious horseplayers as simply Bogy. Handy Hal worked for Bogy in his on again, off again import-export business. So now the question arose: why were Bogy and Handy Hal wanting to find Kipling? More important, did they find him?

I drove back the three or four blocks to the Surfer Bar and Grill. Bogy and Handy Hal were regulars at the Surfer Bar. Notorious horseplayers, both would trample

their families to get a bet down on a well-connected overlay. Handy Hal, widely recognized in horse-playing circles, was particularly noted for his eagerness to provide unsuspecting players with worthless tips on sorry horses. Whether he did so because he was a lousy handicapper or so he could rush to the john and double over in gut-wrenching laughter no one could decide.

Bogy was a different story. His family had left him a considerable fortune and a thriving business. At one time Bogy owned several race-horses, the best of which was Bogy's Lark. Bogy's Lark won only one race before he was claimed away. Bogy managed to lose virtually all of his inheritance on the horses. And it was rumored that his family's once thriving import-export business was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

I didn't spot Handy Hal or Bogy in the Surfer. But Lena rushed up when I crawled onto a barstool.

"Joe, is there any news?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "And it's all bad. But I might be onto something." I handed her the poem I'd taken from Kipling's typewriter.

"Does this mean something?" she asked, studying the sheet.

"I don't think so. But I thought you'd like to have it for your collection."

"Oh, thanks, Joe." She laid the poem lovingly on the backbar for later framing.

Studying the fifteen or so framed poems that lined the backbar, I asked, "Why do you suppose Handy

Hal and Bogy would want to find Kipling?"

"I don't have any idea," she said. "They hardly know each other."

"Didn't Kipling write poems about both them guys?" It was a good guess because Kipling wrote poems about all the regulars. I'd let you in on the poem he wrote about me, but I can't stand to be laughed at.

She dragged the framed poems from the wall and put them on the bar before me. The first poem concerned Bogy and the screwy horse he owned:

Bogy's Lark

*His name, I recall, was Bogy's
Lark.*

*He did his sprinting at Beulah
Park.*

*Lark could not be held to blame,
For winning races wasn't his aim.*

*Fourteen times he'd started a race.
Fourteen times he took second
place.*

*They lowered the class and slowed
the pace.*

*But his finish stayed fixed, race
after race.*

*From out of the South came Gypsy
Songs,*

*A mighty speedster at six furlongs.
Gypsy Songs held at six to five.*

*When the place pool began to come
alive*

*With just eighty bucks on Lark to
score,*

*For win he was weak, for place
much more.*

*There was twenty-six grand on
Lark to place,
As they filled the gate for the start
of the race.*

*At the eighth pole Gypsy was out
front by five,
And good old Lark had started
his drive.
He flew by four horses to have sec-
ond spot,
Then slackened a bit, satisfied
with his lot.*

*He'd chanced on the leader to
within half a halter,
When that one stumbled and
started to falter.
Lark planted his feet and went in-
to a slide.
He was giving the jockey a helluva
ride.*

*Where he'd tried to stop, he left a
long channel.
Sadly for naught, since he'd won
by a panel.
The roar of the crowd was a thun-
derous din.
He paid 2.20 to place, 260 to win.*

"You think there might be a clue
there?" Lena asked.

"No, but they're kind of funny." I
pulled the other poem to me.

Handy Hal

*Old Handy Hal was fit to be tied
Arriving at hell, not knowing he'd
died.*

*He thought, what a dire, dastard-
ly fate,
When the Devil appeared to open
the gate.*

*Said Satan, "Come in, Hal, right
inside,
All that you need will be supplied.
I'm going to give you a fiery gift,
A payment for all the friends
you've stifled."*

"Wait!" cried Hal. "Let's strike us a
deal."

"Sorry," said Satan, "but no ap-
peal."

"A colt in the fifth at Calder is set.
Sixty to one, can you pass up the
bet?"

*The Devil cackled with fiendish
glee.*

*"Hal, you begin to interest me.
Come say your horse if you'd have
heaven,
For the field is off at four oh-seven.*

*"Quickly—the winner of the race
For a sinner's ticket to the other
place!"*

*Hal told the horse, then began to
choke:*

Satan had gone in a puff of smoke.

*When a little time passed, he
reappeared,*

*And to Hal he angrily sneered,
"You stifled me, Hal, you'll burn
for this jest."*

*"Sorry," said Hal. "Just habit I
guess."*

Kind of clever but not very flat-
tering. I turned to Lena. "Do you re-
member if Hal and Bogy were in
the Surfer Bar when you sent off
your double bet with Kipling?"

"Well, you know we have to make
Bogy sit by himself at the table in
the corner because it makes some

of the customers sick if they see him eat. But Hal was at the bar. Kipling and me was joking about going to Australia if I ever hit the big daily double."

"Then you figure Boggy and Hal knew about your daily double bet?"

"Everybody in here knows about the bet," she said. "I been making that same bet for six years. I figured out that I've bet two thousand six hundred and nine dollars in double bets. Up to yesterday I only won a hundred and thirty seven dollars."

"Well," I reminded her, "like they say, you got a chance to get even every half hour. Do you know where Boggy's import business is?"

"I'm not sure that he's still in business," Lena said. "But he called the place Exotic Import and Export."

It turns out Exotic Import and Export was within walking distance, only a couple of blocks over from the Surfer. I took the Mustang anyway.

Boggy's business was located in a small industrial park, a leased slot partitioned off from other small businesses in a larger building. There was a rug cleaner on his right and a plastic bag company to his left. I opened the door and walked in. A smallish fellow toiled away at a desk behind the counter. He didn't look up when I came in.

He remained staring at the papers on his desk. "Hey, buddy!" I said.

He looked up. "My name ain't buddy. It's Duane."

"Okay, Duane. I'd like to talk to Boggy or Hal."

"They ain't here. And they won't be back today."

"Is that right? Well, Duane, that fifteen-year-old green Mercedes outside looks a lot like Hal's bomb. Maybe I better go in the back there and see if he didn't come in while your brains were out to lunch."

"You better get out of here or I'll call the cops," was Duane's reply. It was a threat I couldn't take seriously. If anything legal were going on here, it would be a major surprise.

"That's a good idea," I said. "Why don't you do that while I have a look around." I opened the counter and started toward the doorway that led to the warehouse area. Duane made a grab for my arm. I put my open palm on his face and pushed him into his chair. The chair rolled across the room with him in it and slammed into the wall. "I suggest you get on the phone to the cops right now," I repeated.

Instead of that, he jumped up from the chair and ran out the open door into the parking lot.

Metal shelving on each side of the doorway made a hallway five or six feet into the warehouse area. I went in quietly and took a peek around the shelving. The large body of Handy Hal blocked my view for a minute or so. As I watched, he moved to the side to reveal Kipling strapped to a chair in his underwear. His bony little body was covered with angry red welts. He looked very small and defenseless. I caught myself marveling at how knobby his knees were and shook it off. I needed a plan.

I watched Hal walk slowly from side to side in front of his victim. He wrapped and rewrapped the belt around his hammy fist.

"I always took you for a wimp," said Hal. "With all them poems and stuff—but I gotta admit, you're a tough little bastard. I give you credit for that, but you might as well tell me where you stashed that ticket 'cause I'm gonna whomp you with this belt until you do."

"I could use a drink of water," Kipling managed to gasp out.

"I gave ya a drink last night," said Hal. "You tell me where you put the ticket, I'll give you a Coke and let you go. Otherwise, I'm gonna smack you upside the head with this belt again. This time I'm gonna use the end with the buckle."

"I'm not going to tell you anything," Kipling answered. "The ticket belongs to Lena. She's the only one who's going to get it."

Hal shrugged his fat neck and reared back with the belt. I started to move, then stopped as Hal lowered the belt to his side. "What I don't understand," said Hal, "is why you worry about that old bag. She's as ugly as a turkey buzzard."

"I don't expect you to understand anything," said Kipling. "You're an idiot."

Hal struck quickly with the belt, smacking Kipling on the arm.

"Yeeooooow," Kipling screeched. But quickly his eyes steadied on Hal, and he spoke in a controlled tone. "You want to talk about ugly, your ex-wife's so ugly she'd make a starving crocodile back away from a dead chicken."

Hal began to chuckle. "You know you're right, she is ugly. I always liked you. You're a nice little guy. This ain't nothin' personal. But all the same, you're gonna tell me

where you put that ticket. We know you didn't take it home. And we caught you before you went to work." Hal let the end of the belt out an inch or so in a menacing fashion. It was time for me to act. There were several two-by-fours leaning against the shelving. I selected a four foot specimen and went around the shelving. Hal still had his back to me and was whirling the belt in a theatrical, threatening way. Kipling, without his glasses, squinted at me but said nothing.

I tapped Hal on the shoulder with the end of the two-by-four. When he turned, I drove about two feet of the board into his stomach. Kipling kicked at him from his chair as he plopped down on his behind and made funny gurgling noises. While I untied Kipling, Handy Hal focused his being in a devoted effort to suck in every cubic centimeter of air in the warehouse.

"You okay?" I asked Kipling once he was loose.

"No, I'm not okay," he said. He walked over and kicked Handy Hal in the rump. "This dummy has been smacking me with a belt part of yesterday and all day today. How okay can I be?"

"Just thought I'd ask." Handy Hal still had not recovered. "I take it that Hal was after Lena's double ticket."

"Yeah—that pig Bogy offered Hal fifty percent of his worthless import business if he was able to get the ticket, cash it, and hand the money over to Bogy. I guess Exotic Import and Export is on the rocks big-time. You see my glasses and

clothes anywhere?" I recovered the clothes and glasses from a chair in the corner. Handy Hal was still unable to raise himself to a sitting position, but his puffing was becoming less labored.

"Where is the ticket, anyway?" I asked.

Kipling put on his glasses and gave me a crooked smile. "I let him beat on me for a day and half, but I don't tell him where the ticket is. What makes you think I'm going to tell you?"

"I'm a good guy, remember."

"I've only got your word for it. I'll wait and tell Lena. It's her ticket."

When Handy Hal was again able to talk, he explained to me that he had no idea it would be so difficult to get the ticket from the little poet. "I figured if I threatened him with torture, he'd just squeal like a pig and hand it over."

The cops charged Hal with assault and kidnapping. I had misjudged Kipling also. I never would have suspected he was that tough. I'm not even sure I could have held up as well under the same conditions.

Came to find out a week or so after the events that Kipling had

been so excited about winning the big double that he rushed right over to Lena's house from the track. He let himself in with the key she'd given him. She wasn't home yet, so he put the ticket in the manuscript of his poems that she kept there. He was running late for work. He went directly from her house to the Song of the South Realty Company, where Bogy and Hal grabbed him.

I gave Kipling a ride back to the Surfer in the Mustang and explained to Lena why he was all beat up. Any question about its being true love was certainly answered in the affirmative. She'd believed in him, and he hadn't let her down.

There was much jubilation and free drinks. Lena tried to force the hundred dollar bill on me again. I told her to consider it a wedding present. Then came Kipling.

"I really appreciate what you did for me. Anything I can do to repay you?"

I know he expected I would tell him to forget it. But not this time. I couldn't pass this up. "There is one thing," I said.

"Name it."

"Do you suppose you could rip up that poem you wrote about me?"

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Spell

Arthur Gordon



Illustration by Patrick Timmes

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/02

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Excuse me, sir, I see that you are smoking—could you possibly spare a cigarette? We are not allowed to have them here. A wise rule, no doubt, in the majority of cases. Lunatics should never be trusted with fire.

But believe me, sir, I don't belong in this place with all these crazy people. Really, I don't! I'm as sane as anyone, as sane as you are. But there you sit in your parked car, free to come and go as you please. And here am I behind these bars . . .

Oh, please don't go away! Don't drive off just because I am talking to you. I won't cause you any embarrassment. Not the slightest. I won't even ask you again for a cigarette.

I suppose you're waiting for someone. Your wife? A friend, perhaps? One of the doctors who work here in the asylum? It doesn't matter. If I see anyone coming, I'll stop talking. I'll go away from the window. But until then, please stay. You don't know what it means to be able to talk like this to somebody on the outside. Somebody who will listen, somebody who might even believe . . .

No, that's too much to expect, of course. But tell me, sir, do I *sound* like a madman? Is there anything irrational in the way I talk? My mind is as good as it ever was; truly it is. I can solve a problem in trigonometry for you, or recite one of Shakespeare's sonnets. But when I try to tell the truth, they won't believe me.

Sir, you're a gentleman, that's obvious. You have the sympathy and the tolerance, the willingness to hear a man out. I can recognize those qualities for a very good reason. I'm a gentleman myself.

Oh, you wouldn't think so from looking at me, I know. And you wouldn't think so if you read my medical file. It says that I am David Greenlea, merchant seaman, a hopeless paranoiac suffering from insane delusions. But, sir, I swear to you I'm not David Greenlea, and I'm not insane!

Let me tell you, sir, just how it happened. And let me beg of you not to judge me by the way I look. This broken nose, these gnarled hands—they're not mine, I tell you, they're not mine! They belong to David Greenlea, that's true. But I'm not David Greenlea, I'm not. I'm not. I'm Edgar Greenlea, vice president of the Overseas Shipping Company, with a house on Edgewater Drive and a wife and two fine children . . . oh, you must believe me!

But wait. I'm going too fast. I can see the disbelief in your eyes. And the pity. I don't blame you, sir, really I don't. But hear me out, I beg of you. It will only take a minute or two. And it will cost you nothing. Just a cigarette, perhaps, if you're so inclined.

It happened a year ago, almost to the day. I was in my office, as usual. I was in my own body, too, not this tattooed monstrosity that you're looking at. Oh, I know that does sound insane, but let me explain, *please!*

First published in the January 3, 1954, issue of This Week, copyright 1954 by United Newspapers Magazine Corporation. Reprinted by permission of the author.

One of our ships, the *Eastern Star*, had docked only that morning. About noon they brought me word that David Greenlea had come ashore, was drinking himself blind in a waterfront tavern. David Greenlea, my first cousin, a wretched ne'er-do-well, always drunk or fighting, always in trouble. I had got him his berth on the *Eastern Star*. Without my influence, he would have lost it a dozen times. But there was no gratitude on his part, sir. None at all. Indeed, he hated me, hated me because I was successful, respected, everything he wanted to be—and was not.

Malevolent as he was, I felt responsible for him as a member of the family. And so I went down to that tavern. I found him, drunk and disgusting. I took him into a back room and ordered coffee. We were alone there

...
Sir, could you *possibly* let me have a cigarette? Just one? Look, I'll stretch my arm through the bars as far as it will go. If you could just put one in my fingers, I'd be so grateful. Really, you don't know how agonizing it is to watch another man smoke while you . . . Oh, thank you, sir, you are most kind!

So I made David drink the coffee. I got him fairly sober, but he kept reviling me. He accused me of secretly loathing him, despising him. I said that I didn't despise him, I only pitied him. When I said that, he gave me a strange look, half drunken and half cunning. Then he smiled. I tell you, sir, I have seen that smile a thousand times since, in my dreams.

"Let me show you a trick, Cousin Edgar," he said, "a trick I learned from a sing-song girl in Hong Kong. A little magic, black or white depending on where you sit."

He took something out of his pocket and put it on the table, and I saw that it was a cone of cheap incense. "First there must be pity," he said, smiling that evil smile, "if the spell is to work. Then there must be a burnt offering, and finally there must be the words."

I thought he was raving, but I decided to humor him. So I . . . pardon me, sir, could I trouble you for a light? You needn't give me a match, just hold the flame where I can reach it with the tip of the cigarette. That's right. Thank you, sir. Ah, but that's good . . .

So I said to my cousin David, "What words?"

He had the incense lighted now, and the smoke was rising up between us. He looked at me through it, just as I am looking at you. Then he said the words. Come closer. I'll whisper them to you. Just a little closer. There!

It works! It works! By the ancient and terrible gods, the spell still works! I thought it would, I hoped it would! Oh, I *am* sorry, sir, to leave you in there. But I had to get out, I had to! And this was the only way. I had to change places with you, don't you see? I had to exchange bodies with you, just the way David did with me!

Oh, *please* don't scream like that, and shake the bars. The attendants will come and put you in a straitjacket. Because to them you'll just be Da-

vid Greenlea, merchant seaman, hopeless paranoiac. And no matter what you say, they won't believe you. You'll have to bide your time, just as I did. You'll have to wait until someone pities you, and then there must be a burnt offering, remember, and then the words. Don't forget the words.

Now I must be going, for I have much to do. Ah yes, much to do. My cousin David will not be expecting me, not looking like this. What a surprise for David, what a surprise!

I'll take your car, sir, because you won't be needing it any more. Thank you for everything, especially the burnt offering—I mean, the cigarette. Goodbye, sir. Goodbye.

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "A VALENTINE"

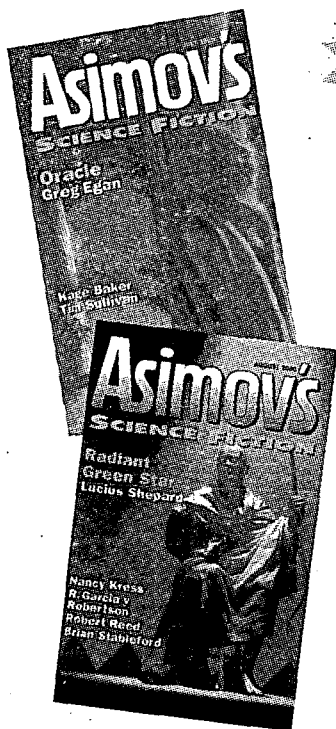
The Valentine's recipient is Frances Sargent Osgood, a poet and a friend of Poe's. Her name is discovered by finding the first letter of the first line ("F"), then the second letter of the second line ("r"), then the third letter of the third line ("a"), and so on.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

Dave Garrels, the floor finisher who spent six hours and twelve minutes in Lady Worthington's mansion, was the one who cracked her safe.

NAME	PROFESSION	ARRIVED A.M.	LEFT P.M.	TIME INSIDE
Andy Kingman	paperhanger	8:45	2:33	5:48
Burt Hawkins	electrician	9:32	3:30	5:58
Carl Landau	carpenter	8:15	2:03	5:48
Dave Garrels	floor finisher	9:05	3:17	6:12
Earl Indura	plumber	9:40	3:30	5:50
Fred Jackson	painter	9:13	2:03	4:50

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BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



An Atlanta setting, a wealthy black murder victim, and an engaging female district attorney make Lelia Kelly's **Officer of the Court** (Pinnacle, \$6.99) worthy of your note. Laura Chastain is assigned to the case of bringing swift justice to the accused, a petty thief whom the police can prove was driving Lawrence Belew's Lexus while Belew's body was stuffed in the trunk. Certainly Belew's family, with both money and political clout, are assured by Laura's boss that this is an open-and-shut case. Two problems, though: Laura isn't convinced that the accused did anything more than take a car for a joyride; and the more digging she does, the angrier she is making her law enforcement cronies—including her policeman boyfriend. A snappy pace and a strong behind-the-scenes storytelling style make this one a fast read.

In the mood for a Scottish police procedural? Pick up Iain McDowall's **A Study in Death** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$21.95). Crowby University professor Roger Harvey is on the brink of attaining the academic recognition and success he has longed for when he's discovered murdered in his own flat by a would-be burglar. Detective Sergeant Kerr and partner Detective Chief Inspector Jacobson begin interviewing neighbors and the deceased's friends and colleagues, and it soon develops that Harvey was single, something of a ladies man, and the author of a fairly popular book on his subject which has led to a Stateside job offer. As Jacobson and Kerr dig, the case seems to lead in several directions, from Amsterdam to a New Age meditation center, from stolen multimillion dollar software to a long-ago episode of philandering. The detectives are easy to be around, and McDowall's take on what drives people to crime is solid and credible.

Bestselling author William Diehl's latest, **Eureka** (Ballantine, \$25), is a huge and richly satisfying tale that is, ultimately, only marginally about murder. What is more significant and memorable is the author's portraits of a small coastal California town and the folk who formed Eu-

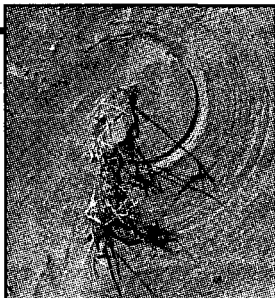
reka over the half-century covered in the novel. In that sense it reminded me of Stuart Woods' *Chiefs*; a single thread runs through several generations. There it was a serial killer. The heart of this story is shared by two men, Thomas Brodie Culhane and Zeke Bannon, each a wounded veteran of a separate World War, each a man of strong loyalties and deep honor. Each is also a lawman, and it is the death of a middle-aged woman in his Los Angeles precinct that originally sends Sergeant Bannon up to the valley town now ruled by Brodie Culhane. There is a death at the center of this tale, but the suspense comes from learning the truth in spurts; that is how Diehl has imaginatively structured this book. Beautifully written to evoke each period and teeming with full-bodied characters, *Eureka* belongs on the must-read list of anyone who enjoys fiction of any kind.

Martha C. Lawrence's psychic investigator, Elizabeth Chase, is drawn into the range of a merciless killer with the kidnapping of a four-year-old boy. In *Ashes of Aries* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), Matthew Fielding is taken from his own back yard on the secluded and elite estate in San Diego where his father owns a huge telecommunications firm, and Elizabeth is called in by the local police who have seen her successes in previous cases. She has barely begun, however, when a wildfire breaks out and destroys even more of little Matthew's family life. It is quickly labeled arson, and Elizabeth is convinced that it is connected to the abduction. She also believes that the person responsible has more havoc planned. Lawrence has created a credible heroine with special gifts for crime solving and continues to place her in equally believable, hair-raising situations. What more could you ask for? Look for her earlier novels in paperback from the same publisher.

Anna Gilbert's *A Morning in Eden* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$22.95) is a pleasant throwback, a tale of obsession and innocence set in an English village after the First World War. Gilbert writes in a quietly compelling style reminiscent of Daphne Du Maurier or the quiet loneliness of middle-class folk that Barbara Pym dealt with. In this novel Lorna Kent leaves the only home she's ever known following the death of the beloved aunt who raised her. She comes to the rural town of Canterlow to live with her last surviving relative. Here she is drawn into the life of the local headmaster—a romantic, sophisticated figure with a beautiful invalid wife—as well as that of a strange young woman who has returned to the town where her older sister, pregnant and unwed, died in a watery grave years earlier. Gilbert draws the reader in as surely as heroine Laura is pulled into a tragedy not of her making.

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas. Honorable mentions go to Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Carolyn Ostrom of Arlington, Virginia; Carol Lee Hong of Honolulu, Hawaii; Will Ludwigsen of Arling-



ton, Virginia; James Haggerty of Melbourne, Florida; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Andrew McAllister of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; Vicki A. Daly of Burlington, Ontario, Canada; and Tyler Stallings of Huntington Beach, California.

Lucien Clergue/Stone

ALIENS by Frank Peirce

A Boy Scout, hiking in the desert to earn an Explorer Scout merit badge, discovered circles in the sand. Inside the circles were a rock and a piece of sagebrush. The Scout called his Scoutmaster on his cell phone and reported finding the circles and their location.

His Scoutmaster told him to continue his hike, then called a reporter.

The reporter, seeing a chance to make a fast buck, called a tabloid, claiming that a UFO had landed in the desert.

Pressed for details, the reporter said that a Scout, hidden by sagebrush, watched aliens from the UFO gather samples of sand, rock, and sagebrush before being beamed aboard and flying off. The UFO was already miles away, he said, when an alien came from behind a dune, zipping up his spacesuit. Discovering he'd been left behind, the alien ran into the desert, chasing after the spaceship. The boy's Scoutmaster, the reporter added, swore by the Scouts' oath that the story was true.

Reading the story later, the Scoutmaster swore a different oath.

Using a helicopter, government agents checked out the story of an alien in the desert. On finding the circles, the agents realized they were a crude compass, with the rock and the sagebrush pointing north. Tracks led from the compass in a straight line. Following them from the air, the agents discovered other compasses equidistant along the way. They finally caught the alien—an illegal alien from Mexico.

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